

Yom Kippur Drasha - Kol Nidrei 5782

Bet Mishpachah

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During my senior year in high school, I fell in love with a short poem that my English teacher introduced me to. It is a poem written by Stephen Crane, the author best known for his novel, *Red Badge of Courage*.

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;

Round and round they sped.

I was disturbed at this;

I accosted the man.

"It is futile," I said,

"You can never -"

"You lie," he cried,

And ran on.

When we read these words, with whom do we associate? At first read, I saw myself as the author witnessing the troubling behavior of a man doing the same thing over and over again with no change in outcome. I related to the speaker who pointed out the futility of the pursuit and shook my head in dismay when the pursuer did not listen to reason. But now, I'm much more interested in the man pursuing the horizon, despite the nay sayers. I want to know why he keeps running. What does his relentless perseverance have to teach me? He is so sure of the value of the pursuit. So confident that he will one day accomplish that which others see as an impossible dream. It calls to mind the famous words of Theodore Herzl who envisioned a Jewish state and told us "*Im tirtzu, ein zo agada*/If you will it, it is no dream." To dream, to pursue, to persist tirelessly, this is the Jewish way.

Why? Why do we continue to pursue the horizon when it eludes us time after time? Why do we engage in the pursuit of justice when we can see how much still remains, how little we have accomplished? Why do we march, protest, speak out, write letters, and put ourselves in harm's way when our goals remain elusive?

When I read the books of the prophets, I often come to these same questions. Why did they keep telling the Israelites to repent? Why did they spend their time telling the truth when

the truth made them so unpopular? It must have been incredibly frustrating to know what was right and good, to attempt with all your might to get that message across, and to still have people ignore your good intentions. One answer we can give is: of course they persisted. They were on a mission from God. We saw what happened to Jonah when he decided to ignore that call. He ended up in the belly of a fish. When called by God to do something, a prophet does it, no matter whether or not their message falls on listening ears.

But that can't be the entire picture. I can't be that the fear of God was the only thing to keep them going, or even the promise of reward for following instructions. For Rabbi Rachel Barenblatt, the inspiration to keep going, to keep pursuing justice in the prophetic way, is empathy: 'The verse that begins "צֶדֶק צֶדֶק תִּרְדּוּף, / *tzedek tzedek tirdof*' — "Justice, justice shall you pursue!" — doesn't end there. Torah continues, "in order that you may live and inherit the land which Adonai your God is giving you." We pursue justice in order that we may truly live. In order to live life to its fullest, we need to work toward a world that is just, and that requires all of the empathy we can cultivate.'<sup>1</sup> The prophet continued speaking out because this is what it means to live. We pursue justice, even when justice is out of our grasp because we hold empathy as a motivating kernel in our souls.

In spite of our best efforts, our pursuit of justice has not yielded the results that we had so desperately worked toward. The Supreme Court has all but done away with *Roe v. Wade*, a virus still rages throughout the world, the wealth gap increases, the Equality Act is put on hold by unwilling and uninspired lawmakers, deep racism permeates our institutions and our hearts, guns are no less prevalent or harder to get in our country, and we humans continue to bring on a climate disaster with little change in our own behavior despite deadly storms and heat waves. So, why do we continue to give ourselves the headaches? Why do we spend our material and spiritual resources on causes when progress is elusive and not a guaranteed outcome? Isn't it a waste?

According to Elie Wiesel, an author and Holocaust survivor, it is not a waste. Wiesel tells the story of a man in Sodom, the city filled with evil people that God wanted to, and eventually did, destroy. This man was the one and only righteous person in the entire city. He walked the streets protesting the injustice of his city. People made fun of him, derided him. Finally a young person asked, "Why do you continue your protest against evil; can't you see no one is paying

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<sup>1</sup> <https://truah.org/resources/pursue-justice-so-that-you-may-truly-live/>

attention to you?" He answered, "I'll tell you why I continue. In the beginning I thought I would change people. Today, I know I cannot. Yet, if I continue my protest, at least I will prevent others from changing me."

Why do we persist? Because it is who we are. We pursue justice relentlessly because this is what it looks like to be the very best version of ourselves. Because we want to cultivate empathy within and because this is what it means to live a life worth living. Rabbi Sheila Peltz-Weinberg writes: "How do we learn empathy? By being encouraged to notice that it actually feels better to be openhearted, connected and loving than it feels to be isolated and cut off. We cultivate good habits by repetition and encouragement, but also by recognizing that they actually make us happier...<sup>2</sup>." We keep going so that we can cultivate within ourselves the good habit of showing empathy to others and to our world. We keep going because the alternative is to grow cold, cynical, and unhappy. We keep going because despite how fruitless the pursuit may seem to onlookers, we know the direction in which the long arc of the moral universe bends.

*Ani ma'amin* - I believe with full and complete faith that the messianic age will come. It may be foolish to say so, others may look on derisively, and say "it is foolish, you can never..." but we will look back at them proclaim "You lie", and then run on. I may become frustrated waiting for it and working empathically to make it happen. But it will happen. It will come. We will pursue the horizon and we will attain it and grasp it and hold it fast. We will run after justice and our community, our country, our world will be better for it. We will maintain our identities as pursuers of justice and speakers of truth because that is our essence and will remain so.

May you be sealed in the Book of Life and Goodness and Justice in this new year, *g'mar chatima tova*.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.centralsynagogue.org/assets/downloads/SJ%201%20-%20Justice,%20justice%20you%20shall%20pursue%20P.pdf>