

What Keeps You Up & What Keeps You Going?

Kol Nidrei, 5780

“What keeps you up at night?”

When I was training to be a community organizer, my mentor, Bill Black, would always start house meetings in new communities with that one simple question: “What keeps you up at night?” Everyone had their own answers, but what surprised me most, in meeting after meeting, was how fast people came up with something to say. I mentioned this to Bill one day, and he asked me, “So Scott, what keeps you up at night?”

To be honest, no one had ever asked me a question like this before, and I had to confess that I didn’t have a great answer. I was 22 years old, a few months out of college, and while plenty of things worried me, like getting into rabbinical school, friends or family who were having a tough time, and my ongoing goals to save the world, I didn’t feel like I was actively thinking about any of these things. So he asked me what I thought about when things are quiet, when I’m done at the end of working. I took a moment, pondered the question, and said, “I want to do a good job. We are working to give people a voice, to give them power, to make the world better, fairer. What I worry about most is messing up so badly that I can’t help the world get better.” Bill looked at me reassuringly and said, “Don’t

worry; you've already messed up plenty, and we're still here doing the work."

That question, "What keeps you up at night?" has been on my mind a lot as of late. I want to ask you each now: What keeps you up at night? Is it finances or planning for an unknown future? Is it feeling alone or misunderstood? Maybe you worry about the health of your marriage, your career, or your own mind and body. Perhaps it's thinking anxious thoughts about your children, your parents, your friends, or those faceless, nameless strangers, those we view and treat as "other" that give you pause.

Whatever might be keeping you up at night, chances are that it has to do with something you fear. When community organizers, like my mentor Bill, asked what keeps people up at night, what they are really asking is, "What makes you angry, afraid, worried, or sad enough that you spend your energy actively anxious about it? What occupies your mind enough that it might motivate you to actually do something about it in order to allay those concerns"

But there's another way to look at the idea of something keeping you up at night. A few weeks ago, I read a somewhat different story about three different people who choose, voluntarily, to stay up all night. The story

focused on an employee at 7-11, a police officer, and a DJ, each of whom had chosen to work a job that took place at night.

At a certain point in each of their stories, the reporter asked them to explain why they were up at night. Henok, who often works back-to-back eight-hour shifts at 7-11, said he took the night shift because the money was better, and fewer people wanted those hours, so he took as many shifts as possible in order to support his family.

Jeff, a police officer for over twenty years, now has the seniority to choose his shifts and opts to take the night shift. He said that at night, people need extra help, whether they are just having a day gone wrong, or they are homeless, or whether they are being targeted by criminals who work under cover of darkness. It's a time when you are needed urgently, and he wanted to be able to help.

Sean, a DJ, wanted to find a way to be creative that inspired people, and had a talent for creating a soundtrack that helped other people relax and have fun. He says that he loves being able to connect to people all over the world through music and being up at night, when they're open and ready to connect, is a uniquely wonderful way of experiencing the world.

Three different people, all working when many of us are asleep, all trying to make the lives of the people around them a little bit better in their

own unique ways. These three people could not be more different in their life stories, their experiences, their jobs, their lives, and their goals. And yet each of them felt like they were doing good for people through their nightly work, whether it was their own families, their communities, or strangers around the world.

These individuals were being kept awake at night not only by their jobs, but by the values and goals that lead them toward the work that helped them live out their values. Each one was doing work that, by many, is seen as taxing, draining, potentially dangerous, and maybe even a bad idea, but the values that are the core of their being animate these late nights with a glow of care and purpose.

Perhaps the more important question, then, is not, “What keeps you up at night?” but rather “What wakes you up in the morning?” What are the values that animate your life? What are the things about the world in which you live that actively excite, stimulate, and energize you? And where, in the course of your everyday, do your values and your concerns compel you to act?

In his incredible book, *The Purpose Path*, Northwestern University business professor and pastor Nicholas Pearce advocates a life philosophy that he refers to as “vocational courage.” Pearce’s idea is that each of us

has a particular and individual task in this world, something that we are both uniquely called to do. This might be something that others find ridiculous or impractical, but Pearce argues that the work we do, the way we spend our time each and every day should in a very real way connected to the core of who we are and why we are on this earth. Our vocation should be linked with our values, and in so doing, our chores become a calling, our work becomes worship. Pearce goes on to explain this phenomenon, saying:

I recognize that the fullest expression of my relationship with God is not only in my private times of prayer and worship. How I express my relationship with God is just as important in the public square as it is in my private prayer...In the words of Saint Benedict, it makes you pray as though everything depends on God and then work as though everything depends on you. (pp. 75-76)

Incredibly, another religious leader said much the same thing a few thousand years ago. The prophet Isaiah, exhorted us not to merely sit back and pray for the best. In chapter 58 of Isaiah, which we will read tomorrow as a part of the Haftarah for Yom Kippur, he asks us pointedly if we have actually done the work in the world in order to make our fast meaningful. “You fast in strife and contention, And you strike with a wicked fist!” exclaims the prophet (Isaiah 58:4). Isaiah pushes us to refrain from simply gathering together, even in heart-felt, contrite humility, while at the same time pulling away from doing meaningful work in the world.

What is it that holds us back? We have all felt it at one point or another. We have seen something wrong happen in our world, something that tears our hearts to pieces, and yet we resist taking action. I have been there too. I have seen wrongs and failed to speak, seen atrocities and failed to act. Last week, on Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Arnow spoke of the ways in which waiting can be active or passive, but either way, it is a holding pattern that seeks to shield us from the fact that the world is changing, as are we all. But there is a danger in waiting. Those of you who gathered together just two weeks ago for our Selichot service heard similar words reminding us of the price we pay when we fail to heed the blaring calls of life and wait too long to act:

We wait too long to do what must be done today, in a world which gives us only one day at a time, without any assurance of tomorrow... We wait too long in the wings, when life has a part for us to play on the stage

Why do we wait, when we are called by our values, by our conscience, and by very fiber of our being to act? Because we are afraid, we are self-conscious; because we are busy, each of us so incredibly busy.

But most of all because we lose hope. We think "What can I possibly do, I who am only one person?" What can any of us, even the most well-read, well-connected, well-funded, well-organized individual, do against the real problems facing our neighborhoods, our communities, our country, our

world. We don't act, because we are afraid to care and to try, and in the end still fail to make a change.

The sages of the Mishnah were perceptively aware of this all-too-human lament, and choose to remind of what we are truly capable of by asking the same question about the beginning of Torah that so many of us have asked at some point: Why would God create the world with just one person, when God literally spent all of the time in creation before getting to people creating an unfathomable number of other living creatures? Our Sages explain:

[A single person was created] to proclaim the greatness of the Holy Blessed One; for humans stamp many coins with one seal and they are all like one another; but the King of kings, the Holy Blessed One, has stamped every human with the seal of the first created human, yet not one of them is like another. Therefore, everyone must say, "For my sake was the world created." (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5)

Everyone not only has the ability, but rather has the obligation to see the world as being created solely for their sake, but we must also walk through the world with the knowledge that all people can say the same. If each of us is infinitely precious, then each of us is infinitely powerful. This passage from Mishnah Sanhedrin pushes us a step further and maintains that this line of thinking is precisely why taking a life is always tragic, because what you are destroying is not simply one tiny grain of sand out of

seven trillion, but rather an entire world's worth of immeasurable potential to do good.

And moreover, if each of us were stamped by the same hand of the Creator of the Universe, made uniquely בצלם אלהים (*b'tzelem elohim*), in the Divine image, then we each, by definition, must have a particular and non-transferable calling.

The problem with a call is that it is only effective when answered. The world may tug at our heartstrings, plague our conscience, and trouble our souls, but it takes an act of will to respond and take up the work. Our ancient fathers and mothers, prophets & kings would cry out הנני (*Hineni*), “Here I am!” in order to accept the sacred task that life had presented to them. And when they didn't, when they attempted to run from the world, to hide their faces from its problems and woes, its grief and strife, they would find themselves in precisely the same precarious position as the prophet Jonah, whose story we recall on Yom Kippur afternoon: tossed about on a tempest of emotional torment, sinking in their dread, and alone in a place of darkness.

We cannot live in denial of that call. Isaiah, continuing his admonition of not only his community, but of all of us reading his words throughout the generations, gives us a way out of the darkness of denial and despair:

*This is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of bondage
To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe them,
And not to ignore your own kin.
Then shall your light burst through like the dawn
And your healing spring up quickly;
Your Justice shall march before you,
The Presence of the Adonai shall be your rear guard. (Isaiah 58:6-8)*

What God, through the prophet Isaiah, asks of us is to act, and to act in ways that benefit us all. But Isaiah is not instructing you merely to feed the hungry when you see them, or clothe the naked when they seek you out and knock on your door. Even when they are not literally, physically in front of you, we are called upon to remember that there are people suffering in every home, in every town, in every corner of our world.

And let me be even more blunt than that. In the past few years, we have seen an almost unthinkable rise in the systems that, either by design or by error, rob people of their basic rights, dignities, freedoms, and protections in our society. We have seen anti-Semitic speech and violence increase so much that every synagogue in the world has regular meetings about security, including this one. We have seen protections for women's health and their sovereign rights over their own bodies under assault in every corner of public discourse and law. We have seen attack after attack

on our queer and trans siblings who want nothing more or less than the God-given right to live as their best selves. And we have seen our siblings of color pushed out of public spaces, silenced, harassed, and killed all because of the bias and discriminatory lens through which they are still, somehow, viewed in this country.

I have seen this firsthand. Over the past year, few causes have been more near and dear to my heart than protecting the most vulnerable individuals in our society: those who are new to our nation. A year ago...has it really been a year?...I was arrested with dozens of other clergy members standing up for the rights of immigrants not to be targeted and harassed by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). Two months ago, I spent almost a full day on a bus trekking with hundreds of other passionate clergy, advocates, organizers, and lay leaders to protest the planned opening of yet another facility to inhumanely house migrants and separate children from their families.

At the time, it felt triumphant. We walked into the middle of this small town in Oklahoma, and we called our leaders to task for their immoral plans and inhuman policies. People stopped their day to listen as we read the names and stories of the dozens of people, young and old, who have died in the hands of a government that is supposed to be of the people, by the

people, and, most importantly, for ALL the people. Complete strangers cried and held one another, and joined brothers and sisters they had never met to decry an assault on basic human rights that just a few years ago seemed unfathomable. To sing out a reproof of hateful acts, to show solidarity in the face of divisive rhetoric felt, to me, like a sacred task, like an offering of word and deed before the Holy Blessed One.

This is sacred work I am calling on you to do today. The year ahead will, no doubt, be filled with controversy and conflict, twisted truths and political ploys. What I call on each of us to do today is to seek out the work that you are uniquely capable of doing to make a difference in the year ahead.

There is so much we can do. I would never tell you who or what to vote for or against, but if are able to vote and actively choose not to, you are letting others determine the tone and tenor of your everyday reality. So stand up; let your voice be heard.

If you read an article about an atrocious act or horrendous government policy, do more than just add an angry-face emoji when you dislike it on Facebook.

If you look around and see that the world is not the way you always thought it would or could be, realize that it is within your power alone to remake it.

If you see others hurt or in need, go out and find a way to fix it. Get together with others, those who think like you and those who come from a totally different perspective, and talk about the ways in which we all need help and the ways in which our help is needed. Then act.

Act now because tomorrow is promised to no one. Act now because your actions are needed now more than ever. Act now because every moment that passes is another moment in which, for someone, cruelty, callousness, and cold-hearted hate come together to push them down or push them away.

Act now because we cannot, any of us, afford to stand together again next Yom Kippur beating our chests and lamenting over the opportunities to do good that we allowed to pass us by. THIS year, we cannot afford to huddle together on the sidelines of history or in the shelter of our own fear.

Act now to unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of bondage, to let the oppressed go free and break off every yoke.

Act now because there is no one else but you. You are each a world of possibility, an entire cosmos churning with infinite power to do good in this world.

So, what keeps you up at night? What do you spend your time thinking about each and every day? Wouldn't you love NOT to stay up? Wouldn't you like to sleep soundly each night, to lie down and no longer be afraid; to wake up each morning, energized with purpose and passion?

Then act. Act tomorrow, and the next day and the day after that until the world around you resembles the world as it really ought to be. If you don't know what to do, just think about the things that cause you the most hurt, those things that that cry out to you and break your heart, those people most in need of help and those policies most in need of changing, and find the ways you can work to make a change. Act now.

The civil rights leader, Fannie Lou Hamer, who fought for equal voting rights and representation for all people, often told a story of an old man so wise that he could answer questions most others thought impossible. One day, two young men decided to trick him. They went to him with a bird in their hands and said, "We will ask him if what we hold in our hands today is alive or dead. If he says, 'Dead,' we will let it fly away, but if he says 'Alive,'

we're going to crush it." So they walked up to the old man and asked, "This that we hold in our hands today, is it alive or dead?"

And the old man replied, "It's in your hands."

It is in YOUR hands. G'mar chatima tova.