

Choosing Your Tikkun

Rabbi Melanie Aron

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I usually speak to my mother in Florida right after she watches the news on TV, and invariably there is something distressing that has happened just that very day. Does it seem to you as well that there are more different things to worry about these days than there used to be?

There are so many issues to choose from.

Our civil rights are under attack, as is a woman's right to choose, also our national parks, lakes and air quality. Our democratic values are being subverted while journalists are being attacked. Gun violence continues to take a record number of lives, and now vaping has been identified as a major health challenge. Did I mention the housing crisis here in San Jose and in many urban areas, issues around racism and criminal justice, the treatment of today's refugees and immigrants, and then of course, global climate change with its implications for our future? (And I wrote this sermon before our current constitutional crisis, the abandonment of the Kurds, and Israel's concerns about this as a threat to their security)

It all seems too much to deal with, and so many times, we respond like the prophet Jonah, pulling a pillow over our heads and trying to sleep through the crisis. Of course, that didn't work for him, when he ducked below during the storm, and it won't work for us in our present circumstances either.

Turning off our news feed for one day a week can help us regain our sanity, but tuning out completely doesn't protect us from the consequences of that which we don't confront. There are too many issues—but that doesn't mean we should desist from addressing any of them.

When overwhelmed by choices about how to respond to the many needs that are pressing to us, our tradition offers two ways to decide what is most important to act on first, and I would like to also offer a third option.

First, our tradition teaches concentric circles; that is, what is at hand is more actionable than what is far away. We have a special responsibility to those immediately around us, the poor and homeless in our community, the families splintered by ICE in our county, the low-paid workers hired through contractors at the larger tech companies or by hotels, stores, and restaurants that don't offer a living wage.

Often I take our tradition's advice and act in this way. The pain I see face to face moves me, and the places locally where I can make a difference call out to me. The peace process in the Middle East is out of my control, but I can build bridges here in Santa Clara County. Sometimes my mission falls into my lap as when our local clergy responded to the stigmatization of those with mental health issues in the response to the shootings in Gilroy. Another example: Back in 2011 a member of our congregation was going through a bone marrow transplant. This was dangerous and difficult in so many ways, among them his inability to be in crowds and thus to attend High Holy Day services. He had never missed the High Holy Days in over half a century. Hearing about his situation, a young man chose to begin streaming our services that year as his Bar mitzvah project, and now our services are viewed each year by hundreds of people, in all different kinds of situations. The Recovery Café in downtown San Jose, which reaches out to the homeless, addicted, and mentally ill, and the food pantry and lunch project at St. Luke's in Los Gatos, both started in a similar way: one person, one step, step after step. Sometimes it is just that there is something that needs to be done, and no one else seems to be doing it.

The second, opposite way, that our tradition commands us to prioritize is by the severity of the need. Starving before homeless, incarcerated before inconvenienced. That is how my oldest daughter and her husband act, giving most of their tzedakah to those organizations that take care of people in greatest need, starving or ill, in other parts of the world. This is how some of the greatest gains of recent decades have been made—

in eradicating disease and starvation, and improving education, especially for women around the globe. Many of us may be unaware that extreme poverty and child mortality have both fallen by half since 1990, along with dramatic decreases worldwide in child labor, while life expectancy in poor countries is increasing, along with access to malaria treatment. Why does it matter that we know this? Hearing all the time about different crises as we do, we may conclude that the actions we have taken in the past haven't made any difference at all and that therefore there is no value to trying to improve things now. That is so clearly not the case. Dollars that go abroad and those that are directed to the needy in the United States, do make a difference. Though there is still plenty to do, there are also great improvements in many people's lives.

Finally, there is the community organizing approach. When we do the work of the Shir Hadash Organizing Committee, we don't begin by researching the greatest local needs in our community, or even finding out about those in most desperate need somewhere on the globe. We don't evaluate to see which problems do the greatest damage. Instead, community organizing starts by asking people about their own perceptions and concerns. What is it that keeps you up at night? What are you most worried about? SHOC has had the experience of researching an issue and agreeing that it's pressing but without anyone feeling individually compelled to do anything about it. That goes nowhere. That is why when we cut an issue, we ask you to vote about where you would invest your own time, so that we can determine where it is that we, with our own particular set of commitments, skills, and contacts, can have the greatest impact.

In the past, I have marshalled Jewish sources to make a case for Jews as Jews taking action on global climate change and I will continue to do so. Come back on October 25 and hear from our members who are doing exciting and meaningful things, many of which we too can do as well. Similarly with immigration, gun violence or criminal justice. There is a lot that our tradition teaches on each of these issues. But this year I am aiming for something different. My goal is to wake up all the Jonahs among us, or more particularly, to keep all of us from falling into the Jonah trap of thinking, 'That's terrible, but there is nothing I can do about it.'

Remember how Jonah went down into the hull of the ship during that big storm? What was he going to do about the weather, he reasoned. The forces of nature were stronger than he was. But the sailors weren't focused on attacking the storm. Instead they recognized that they needed to band together to act if they were going to save the ship.

We are all on that ship and unless we each pull on an oar, we really could capsize. We often talk about fight or flight, but in the animal world, there is also freeze. That works with enemies like hawks and bears—hold still and blend in—but isn't effective against cars. When we get overwhelmed and do nothing, we are endangering our world as much as that deer paralyzed in the highlights has failed to save its own life.

Marge Piercy wrote a poem, about how power comes when we act, when we each do our part and band together to accomplish what no one person can do alone.

**...Alone, you can fight,
you can refuse, you can
take what revenge you can
but they roll over you.**

**But two people fighting
back to back can cut through
a mob, a snake-dancing file
can break a cordon, an army
can meet an army.**

**Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.**

**Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can play bridge and start
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,**

eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration.

A hundred fill a hall.

A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;

ten thousand, power and your own paper;

a hundred thousand, your own media;

ten million, your own country.

It goes on one at a time,

it starts when you care

to act, it starts when you do

it again and they said no,

it starts when you say *We*

and know who you mean, and each

day you mean one more.

-Marge Piercy