

T'shuvah and Activism: A Call for Communal Action

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Discussions of Yom Kippur and atonement are fraught with the tensions between the individual and the communal. We are told of the importance of coming together as a community to reflect on the past year and to work to right any wrongs that we may have caused, but discussion acts of atonement feel - to me, at least - as if they are incumbent on individual action. Cornerstone prayers, such as the Vidui, use the first person plural, enumerating what *we* have done, but discussions of the responsibilities of the community—how we atone—are relatively thin. Given the difficulties we face in our society, I find this unfortunate. As I look at the state of our world, I can't help but think that 5781 must be a year when we as a Jewish community redouble our efforts to make t'shuvah for our sins of inaction in working toward a better world - our failure to work for justice—the “tzedek” at the root of “tzedakah”.

This is not to say that the personal doesn't matter. I know that I have much to atone for in my dealings with my family and friends, and these concerns will continue to be important throughout the coming year. However, this is not enough. If we can't get beyond the personal to look at the bigger picture, we will not be able to truly work toward the world that we want to see.

To be clear, nothing that I am going to say today should in any way be taken as a criticism of the excellent work that our Social Action committee has been doing. Meals at the east end ministry, support of immigrants and refugees, and many other efforts that I'm not aware of make a very real contribution to the community.

However, all too often, this work is often the beginning and end of Dor Hadash's engagement with the issues of the day and the world around us. Speakers at services are told “no politics”—a rule that may be breaking down—and I struggle to find evidence of our engagement with the concerns of the day in our collective synagogue life.

For some, this may be precisely the point. I would guess that there are more than a few people who look to interactions in synagogue as a respite from the world outside. This is completely valid and understandable. However, as we heard from Ed and Symone last week, there comes a time when political issues must be addressed and confronted. We cannot delegate all of our activity as a “socially-engaged” congregation to a subcommittee. I think the times that we are in call us to go further.

I won't go into specific issues in this talk. I don't think I have to. At last week's Rosh Hashanah service, Ed provided a detailed summary of many of the most pressing problems of the current

moment. However, naming the issues is only a start. These challenges demand our collective engagement, as citizens, and as Jews. We must go further, speaking up and acting out as a community to make amends for our silence and our inaction.

So, why communally, and why as Jews? Answers to these questions are, of course, intertwined. As we reflect on our actions at Yom Kippur, we are called upon to act as a collective - from the opening of the Kol Nidre, to the Vidui and the Al Het, the first person plural is used to discuss the sins that we have committed, and to ask for collective forgiveness. T'shuvah is a team sport.

But how does this lead to an obligation to take a strong and clear role in some of the political and social justice issues of the day? In an attempt at a true Reconstructionist stance, I will argue that this mandate stems both from our history and background as Jews and from our place in American society.

Since this is a high-holidays talk, mentioning “history and background” is a cue to referring to scripture. Although much of the days’ Torah portions are procedural and general, referring to mechanics of the observance and the consequences of not following G-d’s law, we are told in the Minhah reading from Leviticus: “Do not pervert the cause of justice—show favor neither toward the lowly nor the mighty. In Justice shall you judge your neighbor”.

The Yom Kippur Haftarah portions are where the real action is providing us with much to work with. As Anne-Marie read to us earlier, Isaiah implores us to make the Yom Kippur fast meaningful. I won’t repeat the verses that Anne-Marie read, but I will note that the raising of the voice is often exactly what is needed to unlock the chains of wickedness.

The need to act is, of course, at the heart of the Jonah story that we will hear later today. Jonah is called upon to point out the evil of the people of Nineveh. He knows that this will be an uncomfortable task, perhaps involving significant risk. He literally tries everything he can to avoid acting, heeding G-d’s call only after being cast into the mouth of the whale. Jonah’s response is quite understandable and familiar—when faced with a difficult situation, many of us will try to take the easy way out—both easily and collectively. But we also learn from Jonah that this refusal to act comes at a cost.

The Akeda, read at Rosh Hashanah, raises these concerns from a different angle. Abraham is told to sacrifice his beloved son. Although the text doesn’t say much about Abraham’s state of mind as he prepared to sacrifice Isaac, we can easily imagine a tormented struggle between what he wanted to do, and what he knew to be his duty. I thought of this story last week when Symone Saul told us of her fear in what I would call her heroic actions at Standing Rock. We must act, but we shouldn’t pretend that it will be easy, or without risk or fear.

Often the question arises - are we exhorted to act for Jews, or for Jews and non-Jews alike. Here again, the call is clear. From Talmud Shabbat 54b-55a, we read: “Anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's household and does not, is liable for the actions of the members of the household; anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's townspeople and does not, is liable for the transgressions of the townspeople; anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not is liable for the transgressions of the entire world.”

We are also compelled as Jews to bear witness. In parsha Vaetchanan, we are told “But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children.” Although the current context was in reference to G-d's actions in saving the Jewish from the Egyptians, we have, in the current context, expanded this exhortation, through our calls of “Never Again”, and through those who have responded to recent crises with the call “never again is now.”

These texts and many others make our obligation to work toward justice abundantly clear—tzedek, tzedek tirdof. But that's only part of the story. It's time to return to the second part of my argument—our place in American society requires that we act. As American Jews, we occupy an in-between space. It's certainly true that we have been, and continue to be, the target of hatred and vitriol. We know all too well that antisemitism is a real, present, and increasing danger that we ignore at our peril. However, the reality is much more complex than the post-Holocaust narrative of weakness and victimhood that dominated by Reform Jewish education in the 1970s. We are affluent, educated, and we have economic and political clout. We know what it means to be persecuted, but we have a voice. Our reach and influence is far out of proportion to our size—at least in numbers. When we have, in recent memory, worked to build support for Soviet Jews or to support Israel, we've been quite successful.

It's time that we marshal these same energies to address the crises in our world. The past few years have seen American Jews rising up to protest, demonstrating while wearing Tallitot, singing songs, blowing Shofars—and often getting arrested. I've been deeply moved and inspired by stories and videos of these actions.

Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, our institutions are somewhat reluctant to jump into the fray. The Jewish establishment and even progressive groups like Dor Hadash have stayed on the sidelines, leaving the activism to newer, and mostly younger, groups. This largely unsurprising reflection of the small-c conservatism seems to be associated with the need to attract and maintain members and donors, or perhaps simply the desire to avoid giving offense. It's time to break through this inertia. It's time for us to stand up as a community to be counted, lest we regret our inaction.

I do not mean to suggest that this will be easy. I know that those in Dor Hadash who hesitate to act do so in good faith, from their view of what is best for the Congregation. This is where it gets messy. Unlike the prophets, we are not faced with direct mandates from the Divine. Instead, we are mere humans, faced with the daunting challenge of quickly reacting to complex situations that we might not fully understand. This is precisely where community and Tefillah come into play. To play a role, we will need to educate ourselves, both on the many layers of the problems around us, and on the words from our tradition, which have much to tell us about the challenges of responding well to strife and troubled times.

This will likely lead to a bit of confusion, perhaps some conflict, and inevitably some mistakes. I'll take this opportunity here to say that I am fully aware that some of the activities that I've pursued over the past few years, through Jewish-oriented activism, might have rubbed some of you the wrong way. It's entirely possible that the comments I make today will give additional offense. If that is the case, I sincerely apologize for any hurt that I may have caused, and I want to learn from it. If my actions or comments have given offense, please let me know—I'd like to make T'shuvah. If you're willing to come, I'll offer you a socially-distanced seat on my front porch, a cup of coffee, tea, or something stronger, and I'll try my best to learn from your concerns.

Given this messiness associated with action, it may be tempting to hold off—to stand on the sidelines rather than make a mistake. I'd like to think that this concern might have been behind the hesitancy that Symone discussed in her talk last week. Being careful about when one takes a stand is an understandable reaction—as public actions and statements can be scary, and often lonely, and there are indeed times when discretion is the better part of valor.

Here again, Torah provides an instructive lesson in Parsha Shelach—the parable of the scouts. At God's command, Moses sends twelve scouts—one from each of the tribes—do some reconnaissance work on the land of Canaan. Ten of them report back that the land is beautiful, but filled with large giants who would not be easily defeated. The scouts fearfully suggest that they should return to Egypt. Despite the dissenting voices of Joshua and Caleb, these fearful scouts prevailed in argument, causing God's wrath and leading—after much pleading from Moses—to the decree that the Israelites would spend 40 years wandering in the desert.

Why were these scouts so afraid? The so-called giants are generally considered to be a fiction, but even if they weren't, the scouts should have felt more confident—as they were sent by G-d. Even with this seemingly strong support, they lacked the strength to take the leap, and they paid the price.

Times aren't that different today. We don't have clear and unambiguous divine support, or even prophets, but we are faced with the challenge of knowing that even small steps toward building the world that we want may mean taking actions that may feel uncomfortable, or even dangerous.

However, we have much to gain, both individually and communally. Engaging in political action from a Jewish perspective has deepened my spirituality and led me to engage with our tradition, in ways that I would not have thought possible just a few years before. Collective action can deepen the meaning and impact of our practice, moving tikkun olam from the abstract to the concrete, possibly even attracting new members and energy to our congregation.

At last Sunday's alternative second-day of Rosh Hashanah service, Nancy Levine asked, "can Judaim save us?" This question provided an interesting contrast to the previous day's retelling of the parable of the villagers who adopted a set of drums to alert neighbors of impending fire. When the fire came, they banged the drums without acting, and the village burned. The lesson is clear—Judaism in itself cannot save us. The fires are burning—both figuratively and literally—and will continue to do so, no matter what happens on November 3 and the days following.

It is time to sound the drums, and to heed their call—both as individuals, and working together. There is much to be done, and, frankly, much to fear. None of us are perfect, least of all me, but we all must find it in ourselves to try harder, and to remember that our strength lies in our numbers, and our community.

g'mar chatima tovah