

Rabbi Fine  
Yom Kippur 5770, Daytime

### **Moving Mountains, One Grain of Sand at a Time**

This week I received an email from a congregant reflecting on her experience at *tashlich* last week.

Her words are relevant to the call to action that we saw in the reading from Isaiah earlier today.

She wrote the following. “When one gets rid of the same 'sins' every year at *tashlich*, something is rotten in Denmark. One thing I toss each year is my sense of desperation and fatalism about the way we have destroyed our planet, and pray that it will be replaced with useful activism.”

The feelings she expressed are I’m sure shared by many of us, whether relating to the state of our planet, or the myriad other challenges we face.

The problems of our world are daunting and complex and can feel overwhelming, even paralyzing.

And in an era when information is transmitted instantaneously, we are bombarded with depressing news from around the world on a daily basis.

In 2009, our world is plagued by wars and fighting, by human beings treating others with unspeakable cruelty. From the Congo to Afghanistan, we human beings continue to kill and hurt one another as much as ever.

Equally disturbing is the problem of hunger in our world. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization reports that over a billion people are living with chronic hunger in 2009.

In the last several years I have become aware of another absolutely devastating issue of our day: the global sex slave trade. Nicholas Kristof has worked to raise awareness of this horrendous practice in his columns in the NYT.

When I was growing up, I had the naïve idea that slavery was something of the past. In fact, every year hundreds of thousands of girls are trafficked as sex slaves. This occurs not only in far off countries, but here in the United States.

And I was profoundly disturbed when I lived in Israel two years ago and visited South Tel Aviv, to learn that there is a significant sex slave trade that takes place in the streets right next to the old bus station.

Equally alarming are the red alarm bells of global climate change that have been ringing louder and louder of with each passing year.

According to the 2009 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change current increasing trends in greenhouse emissions can be expected to raise Earth's temperature by 4-6 degrees Celsius above today's levels, if not more, by the end of this century.

Recent research has indicated that there are **a significant number of "tipping points"**- thresholds beyond which it would become difficult-to-impossible to reverse changes in the climate system-which could be approached if the planet warms more than 3 degree Celsius over the preindustrial level.

The impact of global climate change is no longer simply a matter of projected effects we will see in the future.

For example:

In Australia, 2001-07 registered the most extreme and hottest drought period recorded for this continent, which has had serious impacts on the water-supply on the continent.

In the Himalayas, the Gangotri glacier which provides up to 70 percent of the water in the Ganges River, is retreating 35 meters yearly. Once the glacier disappears, the Ganges will become a seasonal river, depriving 400 million people of water.

In the face of the enormity of these and other challenges we face as a human community, it is easy to despair and ask the question, is it possible to even make a difference? We can wonder, is it even worth trying?

Today I want to offer three reasons why I believe we should not give in to this desperation -- three reasons why we must respond to the challenges we face.

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The first reason why we must actively respond is that to do otherwise is to fail to live up to the most foundational principles of Judaism.

Last night I shared a story about the Bektashi, an Albanian Shiite Muslim group that risked their lives to save 2000 Jews during World War II. The Bektashi did this because they had the courage and conviction to live up to the core religious beliefs of their tradition.

The question that we as Jews must ask ourselves on Yom Kippur is whether we will stand up and live up to the foundational principles of our own tradition.

In our contemporary world, the moral challenges we face are not reserved for rare extraordinary times when there is war at our doorsteps.

Today's haftarah from Isaiah is a prophetic wake up call that we take up these challenges.

But it is not just the prophetic tradition that insists on our responsibility to care for our broken world. From the very beginning of the Torah, in the story of God's creation of the world, there are two essential principals that shape what it means to look at the world through a Jewish lens.

The first principal is one that I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah as well. We read in Genesis 1:

***“Va'yivra Elohim et ha'Adam b'tzalmo, b'tzelem Elohim bara oto, zachar u'nkevah barah otam.”***

**“So God created the human being in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them....And God saw every thing that He had made, and, behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.**

While other near-Eastern traditions asserted that the King of the empire was made in the image of God, our Torah made a much more profound and spiritually democratic assertion – that every human being is made in the image of God.

If every person is made in God's image, then every human being has inherent value. My teacher Rabbi Arthur Green, points out that the implications of this core assertion of our tradition are far reaching.

He says the following:

**“The realization that every human being is God's image makes an unambiguous demand upon us...Each image of God in the world has the right to exist in dignity, to engage in meaningful labor, and to live at peace.”**

**To take seriously our faith that each person is God's image is to treat every person with a spiritual dignity and caring that would transform all of our lives. Surely none of us lives this *mitzvah* to the fullest, but there can be no Judaism that does not constantly attempt to make it a reality.”**

The foundational tenet of our tradition that every person is made in the Divine image, makes the demand on us to respond to the violations of this principal that are so rampant in our world.

The second core principal that we find in the story of the creation of the world is the idea that the most basic job of the human being in the world is to be stewards of the earth.

In the second chapter of Genesis, after God created the human being and planted the garden of Eden, we read the following:

***“Va’yikach Adonai Elohim et ha’Adam va’yanichehu v’gan Eden l’avdah ul’shomrah.”***

**“God took the Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”**

At the foundation of the Torah’s understanding of the purpose of human life, is the idea that we are here to take care of the earth that we live on and of the other creatures who live here with us.

These two principles are at the absolute foundation of our tradition, and cannot be separated from what it means to live as a Jew in the world.

The first reason why we must not give in to fatalism but must do our part to respond to the challenges we face is simply that this is no less than what it means to be a Jew.

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But there is a second reason why we must actively respond to the challenges of our world. It is for the sake of our own well being, our own spiritual health.

In order to be healthy human beings we need to be engaged in responding to the traumatic world we live in.

Trauma expert Dr. Peter Levine has developed cutting edge methods of working with patients who have lived through trauma.

In his studies, he found that people who are able to respond at the time of a traumatic event are less likely to suffer from severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

When faced with overwhelming circumstances, our nervous system has natural protective ways of responding---the commonly known “fight or flight response” to danger.

What we’re learning more about in recent years is that if it is not possible to respond to danger with effective fighting back or escaping, the body freezes in its vigilant and threatened state, and often this ultimately translates into symptoms, into PTSD, into unhealthy patterns.

I believe we could say the same for the human spirit.

In an age when we are constantly confronted with images of suffering and unspeakable crises, we must be engaged in responding to those crises in order to be healthy, to live fully, to not become spiritually frozen.

Or to put it into the framework of the principles I spoke of a few minutes ago, if we allow ourselves to grow numb to the diminishment of the Divine image in others, then we diminish our own Divine image.

If we allow ourselves to give up on our role as stewards of the earth, we give up a core part of our humanity.

On the other hand, the blessing that can come of doing the work of justice is great. I can say it no better than Isaiah did in our haftarah this morning:

**“If you banish the yoke from your midst, the menacing hand, and evil speech, and you offer your compassion to the hungry and satisfy the famished creature – then shall your light shine in the darkness, and your gloom shall be like noonday. The Lord will guide you always; He will slake your thirst in parched places and give strength to your bones. You shall be like a watered garden. Like a spring whose waters do not fail.”**

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Lastly, the third reason that we need to actively engage in tikun olam, in fixing our broken world, is that we truly can make a difference.

When I was at Oberlin College, I worked as a volunteer at an under privileged school.

One day, my supervisor, Professor Booker Peek said something to me that really stuck with me.

He said that sometimes, when we look at all the work to do in the world, it looks like we are standing in front of a huge sand dune that we are trying to move. It looks like an impossible task.

“But,” he said, “if one of those grains of sand is in a person’s eye, and you get it out, you have made a difference.”

And after a while, those grains of sand add up and can start moving the mountains.

We have seen that when individuals, communities, and countries apply human creativity and intelligence to each of the daunting crises I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, we can really make change.

Global hunger is not a result of scarcity of food but rather of political and economic policies that govern our global food system and don’t prioritize feeding the world’s hungry.

The wonderful organization, the American Jewish World Service is currently engaged in a campaign to raise a million dollars to support more than 60 grassroots organizations in 17 countries that are putting food production back into the hands of local communities.

These organizations are teaching people to grow food sustainably, build seed banks, found agricultural cooperatives, advocate for land and water rights, and give women the means to own and cultivate land.

For example, one organization they support, ROSE, has conducted field trainings for 13,000 women farmers, enabling them to provide for their families and communities.

So too with regard to global climate change. Recent research has demonstrated that it is technically and economically feasible to reduce greenhouse gas emissions fast enough so that their atmospheric concentrations can be greatly limited and greenhouse gas emissions stabilized.

In the past year there have been countless success stories in this regard. For example, in German, their climate protection policy avoided some 79 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in 2007.

And I am thankful to say that in Israel there has been some progress to address the issue of sex trafficking due to the advocacy of individuals that has led to greater protection and enforcement by the Israeli government.

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As a Jewish community it is our job to do our part.

We have real power to make change as a community. We are a community of individuals with a huge variety of skills, resources and connections.

Often in synagogues, our social justice work is limited to can drives.

My point is not to denigrate can drives, they are very important for filling the shelves of our local food banks.

But we also must consider that we have real power as a community to make substantive change.

Synagogues such as Bnei Jeshurun in New York City and Temple Israel in Boston have demonstrated this to be the case.

In both synagogues, they undertook a large scale process that began with members having one on one conversations and in parlor meetings to learn what issues they were most passionate about.

They then formed actions groups focused on the issues that members of their community felt most committed to work on. These action groups then worked to figure out what power they had to have an impact as a community.

At Bnei Jeshurun, a very large synagogue, their initial areas of focus were: Health Care and Economic Hardship, Women's Rights, Environmental Action, and Children's Rights. Over the period of a year they

Trained more than 100 congregants to lobby elected officials.

Registered and educated hundreds of Pennsylvania voters about reproductive rights.

Started a partnership with a poor city school.

Forged a coalition which passed a City Council Resolution encouraging city agencies to purchase Fair Trade coffee.

And played a pivotal role in the passage of the NYC Health Care Security Act, ensuring health care coverage for 56,000 low-income workers.

At Temple Israel, the issue they focused on was health care. They became a central force in the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization which helped pass legislation for health care for all in Massachusetts.

At Sinai to, we have the potential to work together to have a real impact.

If you are a person who feels that you should be doing more to improve our world, I invite you to make Temple Sinai a base for doing that work in collaboration with other Sinai members.

Since the communal process I've described is a long term process, I would like to also leave you with a shorter term opportunity.

After Neilah tonight, on the stand outside we will have information about two great organizations that I hope you will consider getting involved with.

The first is American Jewish World Service, whose work to help the hungry I discussed earlier.

The second is Hazon, a wonderful Jewish organization dedicated to doing environmental work from a Jewish perspective.

I invite you to take a handout after neilah, and to go to their websites to learn more about ways to support and be involved with the work they are doing.

May we all be blessed to have less desperation to throw in the ocean next year at tashlich.

May our spiritual work today be for the good of all in the year ahead.

*Gmar chatima tova*, may we all be sealed for a good year