

Yom Kippur Morning

Partners in Creation

I love walking in the woods; it's my favorite way to connect to Creation and to the Creator. One of the many Jewish teachings on our relationship to nature is found in an ancient book¹ that describes how all the creatures of the world, and the world itself, praise God in their own way. Many of us have had rare and wondrous moments where we've sensed an echo of that wild, beautiful song. When our hearts are burdened, however, this beauty can be difficult to perceive.

Last night, I shared with you how the reality of climate change became very apparent to me this past summer. Over several months, I became aware that I was struggling to hear the joyous song of nature. Between the changes in our weather patterns and the knowledge that human activity played a real part in this shift, the woods stopped feeling like a refuge. Instead, they reminded me of all that was wrong with the world. The only song I was open to hearing was a sad, anxious mirror of my own feelings. And, bit by bit, I stopped going out into nature.

I don't want to overstate my feelings; I knew I wasn't directly responsible for climate change! Yet, I felt that I had a duty to respond in some way that I hadn't been able to discern. As Yom Kippur drew closer, I began to realize that this ancient holiday offers us insight into this very modern issue.

Today, we reflect on *aveirot* and *chata'im* – on our transgressions and our shortcomings. Maybe it's a function of American individualism, but it feels like we often focus on our personal shortcomings ("How **I** fell short") to the exclusion of our responsibilities as part of a larger group.

Jewish tradition has long recognized that there are times when an entire community needs to do *t'shuvah* - to declare their need to change for the better. This practice is especially pertinent as we become aware of the many collective issues in our society such as climate change, pervasive racism and misogyny, that demand responses. What is there for which we, as a group, might have a need to atone?

¹ *Perek Shirah* - https://www.sefaria.org/Perek_Shirah.1?lang=bi

Maimonides, the great medieval rabbi, offers guidance on how to respond to “any difficulty that arises which affects the community”:²

*The [community’s] leader should [say to them]: “Brethren, it is not sackcloth and fasting that will have an effect, but rather repentance and good deeds (teshuvah u-ma’asim tovim). [We see this in the story of Jonah]. It doesn’t say that ‘God saw the sackcloth and fasting of Nineveh,’ but rather, ‘And God saw their deeds’ (Jonah 3:10)... The leader should continue in this vein...until the people are humbled and turn [to God] in complete repentance.*³

Maimonides lays out a very accessible two-step process for us. First, we must recognize the need to do *t’shuvah*, to atone for *aveirot bein adam la-Makom*, transgressions between a person and God. That’s the core of Yom Kippur: the day for us to approach God with the honest confession of our failures.⁴ Having done that, our second step is to perform *ma’asim tovim* – to take effective action to correct our shortcomings.

So, let’s start with the first step: *t’shuvah* – repenting of our actions. This process is especially meaningful when we take the opportunity to perceive real-world problems through a spiritual lens. By doing so, we invite ancient Jewish wisdom to help us resolve the most pertinent issues of our day. Climate change is a prime example.

Jewish tradition teaches that we are *shomrei adamah*, guardians for the earth. This was Adam’s task in the second chapter of Genesis, and it’s one that we’ve inherited. Even more, we’re seen as collaborators with God in completing the work of Creation and repairing the world.⁵

The overwhelming scientific position, exemplified by the recent report from The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,⁶ is that we are failing in our roles as guardians and as Divine partners. Moreover, according to a recent article in *The Lancet*, this shortcoming leads to “psychological stressors [in our children that] threaten

² *Mishneh Torah — Ta’anivot 1:2*

³ *ibid*, 4:2

⁴ *Mishnah — Yoma 8:9*

⁵ *Shabbat 119b — we are partners with God when we chant Vayachulu (Gen. 2:15) on Shabbat*

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-58130705>

health and wellbeing, and could be construed as morally injurious and unjust.”⁷ The health of future generations requires us to reclaim our role as protectors of the earth.

In addition to caring for the environment, we’re instructed to uphold the principle of *kavod ha-briyot*. Literally, this means to “honor” God’s “Creations”, especially humanity. This is a key concept in *halacha* – in Jewish religious law. The directive to respect other people is so powerful that it can sometimes override standard religious norms.⁸

We’re obligated to honor all human beings as having been made *b’tzelem Elohim* – in the Divine Image. Moreover, we have a duty to act when that spiritual truth is violated. We have a duty to respond when institutionalized racism leads to abuses in our justice system and death at the hands of police. We must speak up when misogyny leads to rules curtailing women’s autonomy. And we must always engage when xenophobia leads to attacks against immigrants and people of color.

These are just a few examples from the many issues of our day. We each can find causes that speak directly to our hearts. Regardless of the specifics, we recognize that, while we may not have created oppressive situations and systems, we are responsible for dismantling them. The Jewish imperative – always – is that we must pursue justice.⁹

Recognizing the need to atone for our sometimes-inadequate response to these transgressions against our Creator is an important element of accomplishing collective *t’shuvah*. Abraham Joshua Heschel offers a prayer that can serve as a *kavanah* – a spiritual guide – for acknowledging these kinds of shortcomings before God:¹⁰

O Lord, we confess our sins, we are ashamed of the inadequacy of our anguish, of how faint and slight is our mercy. We are a generation that has lost the capacity for outrage. We must continue to remind ourselves that in a free society all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty, all are responsible.

⁷ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3918955

⁸ <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/issues-mussar-and-faith/kevod-ha-beriyot-%E2%80%94-more-human-dignity>

⁹ Deuteronomy 16:20

¹⁰ “A Prayer for Peace” – collected in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*

By claiming our responsibility for these important issues, we begin to address our communal shortcomings. That's the first step that Maimonides offers us: to engage in *t'shuvah* as we recognize the need to change. This is the call to bring ourselves back in alignment with one another, with Creation and with our Creator.

The second step Maimonides involves *ma'asim tovim*, doing good deeds. This is when we take action to correct our transgressions. At this point, I realized that I needed practical guidance - what can we do to take effective action? So I contacted our Green Team and our Anti-Racism group, two of our amazing Tikkun Olam sub-committees, for advice. I asked them both the same question: given that these issues are too big for any one person, how can we meaningfully address them?

The Anti-Racism group offered us the words of author and activist Ijeoma Oluo on this very point: "It is easy to think that the problem of racial oppression in this country is just too big. How on earth can we be expected to dismantle a complex system that has been functioning for over four hundred years? My answer is: piece by piece."¹¹

Oluo offers a long and practical list of actions in her book, *So You Want to Talk about Race*, including: "vote local, get in to school [meetings to speak up about curricula, hiring policies, etc.], speak up in your unions, support POC-owned businesses, boycott [institutions] that prey on people of color, [and] vote for diverse government representatives."

The Green Team reminds us of the importance of spreading the word about issues that concern us. Ask one other person, a congregant, a family member or a friend, to have a conversation where you can share your concerns about how these problems affect us and future generations. Then ask them their thoughts on any actions they might take regarding this topic – and how you could support them in doing so.

Both committees have pages on our website filled with resources and contact information. The Green Team added a special challenge for this new year: sign up for the Beth El Green Challenge with the Jewish Climate Action Network (JCAN) to reduce Beth El's collective carbon footprint.¹² We currently have 70 families signed up – and we're looking to be the first congregation with 100% participation!

¹¹ So You Want to Talk About Race (2018)

¹² <https://community.massenergize.org/JCAN/teams/1>

Performing *ma'asim tovim*, good works, with fellow congregants works to heal our world while also strengthening the relationships that connect our community. As we explored at Rosh Ha-Shanah, this kind of work is one of our core properties – it's an important part of how we define who we are at Beth El. Your presence matters as we engage in this work together.

If you're already part of a *tikkun olam* project at Beth El, wonderful! Keep at it, and invite someone who isn't already involved to join you. If you're not yet connected to our work, choose an issue. Visit our social justice page, talk to our leaders, or share what you're already doing so that we lend our strength to yours!

Even before Maimonides gave us his guidance about *t'shuvah* and action, the Jewish people knew that it's not always possible to see the end of big projects. Nonetheless, we still invest ourselves, fully, in addressing them. That's the teaching of the classic passage, "*lo alecha ha-melacha ligmor, v-lo atah ben chorin l'hivateil mimenah.*" It's not for us to finish the work, and neither are we free to leave off from it.¹³

Finding the resolve to claim responsibility for big issues can feel overwhelming, especially on a day such as this. Yet, as Rebbe Nachman taught us last night, we must not allow this to stop us. We can strengthen ourselves and each other as we engage in *t'shuvah* – in admitting our collective need to change. And then we can act in partnership to perform *ma'asim tovim*, repairing the rifts in our world. The question is not *whether* we should do this work. The question is *how* each of us will hear and answer our Creator's call to atone for our deeds with whole hearts.

On this *Yom Ha-Kippurim*, this Day of Atonement, let's join in the work of *t'shuvah*, recognizing the need for healthful change. Let us unite throughout 5782 in the courageous process of nurturing justice and wholeness in our world. And may it be, as we reaffirm our duty to perfect Creation, that we hear the joyous song of the world as we give praise to the One who brings life to all.

¹³ Pirkei Avot 2:16