

Yom Kippur 5768
Tzedakah -- Why We Must Not Rest
Rabbi Sharon Brous

Last month several neuro-scientists declared that they had discovered a way to induce the sensation of a near death experience without subjects enduring any actual physical danger. With a pair of virtual reality goggles, a video camera and some other props, a person can feel that she is floating, disembodied, a witness to herself from beyond herself. What happens to a person when she has one of these out-of-body experiences? She is able to see her life in perspective, to understand her own impermanence, to grasp the fragile connection between body and soul.

Mercifully, our tradition spares us the expense of virtual reality goggles. Every year we come to High Holy Days and, if we're paying any attention at all, we are awakened to our vulnerability and mortality, to the shattering and disquieting promise of Unetaneh Tokef -- that we, or those we love, might not be here next year. Who by fire and who by water? Who in a car accident? Who by cancer? Who by heart attack and who by terror attack? We are challenged to look at our lives and ask the brutal, terrifying questions we try to bury all year long: am I the person I want to be? Is this the marriage I want to be in? Is this where I had hoped to be at this point in my life? Is this the world I want to live in? We are forced to consider that life is capricious and whimsical, and we are therefore compelled to ask: what are we doing to make a life, and a world of meaning TODAY?

One of my friends, a breast cancer survivor, a young mother of two, described what it's like to live with the constant awareness that each day might be her last. It has been three years since she finished her treatment and the cancer has not returned, but she's still got, as she calls it "that damned gene." As she says: "Left to its own devices, my body will self-destruct. I don't know if the cancer will come back tomorrow, next year, or in 5 years. But I have no doubt that this struggle is not over." How does she live, with the inevitability of cancer's return? "I suck the marrow of out of life. I cheer and cry at my kid's pre-school graduation as if it's his wedding, because I know I may not be at his wedding. I have the best sex I can have. I eat the most exquisite foods and drink the best wines I can afford. And I work every day to leave the world a little better than I found it."

A person who refuses to let the inevitability of her struggle with cancer turn her life into a tragedy. A woman who lives every day of her life with the awareness shared by Rav Amnon of Mainz when he uttered the words of Unetaneh Tokef in his dying breath. He too laid out a prescription of how to live meaningfully, in the face of uncertainty, with the awareness of life's brevity and fragility. *U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'ah hagzeirah* -- repentance, prayer, justice can avert the severity of the decree -- there are three things you can do to make meaning out of the chaos of life.

When we began this journey we were encumbered by the year -- the things we said that we shouldn't have, the things we should have said that we didn't. The fights with our partners, the alienation from our closest friends and family members. We devoted Rosh Hashanah to exploring *teshuvah* -- reconciliation and transformation -- the promise that we don't have to be static and stagnant, dwelling perpetually in the mistakes we have made. We can make *teshuvah* -- we can reclaim our spiritual freedom and unstick ourselves, even when we feel paralyzed. We started with *teshuvah* because we needed to attend to repairing the basic relationships of our lives before we could think beyond ourselves.

Last night we spoke about *tefillah* -- the power of prayer, of encounter with God. We spoke of *tefillah* that flows from our ability to see beauty and pain in the world. What would it take to recognize the sheer majesty of creation, the incredible miracles of our existence -- the fact love is possible, the fact that two cells colliding can create a human life, the fact that tragedy abounds, and suffering is all around us. We can allow ourselves to be distracted by the beauty and the pain of the world, we can let the world take our breath away, we can sing and cry with all our hearts.

And now we come to the third and final step -- *tzedakah* -- when we shift from awareness to action: we are awake to the pain of the world -- what are we willing to do about it?

The Midrash tells a parable of a man, travelling from one place to another when he sees a *birah doleket* -- a palace consumed in flames. He thinks: How can it be that nobody is taking care of this palace -- that it is left to burn?! Who is the *manbig*, the person responsible for this place? At that moment the owner of the palace hears him and says: I am the *manbig* of this place! So too, we learn, Abraham looks out at the world and thinks: Is it possible that the world should just burn without someone working to save it? Who is responsible for this place? And the Holy One hears him and says: I am the *Manbig* of this world!¹

What makes Abraham extraordinary? Despite the distractions of his vast wealth and many resources, despite his luxurious life and abundant blessings, he is able to look up and see that the world is on fire. But it's not enough for him to merely make this observation. He is certain that *someone* must be responsible, so he demands to know who it is. He forces the *manbig* to take responsibility, willing him out complacency, out of disregard for his creation. And the *manbig* comes, on the condition that the one who called him out will share responsibility for putting out the fire.

I like to think of this as the Jewish origin story. The world is burning. Abraham says to God: What are You doing about it? God says to Abraham: What are YOU doing about it? Together, they go to put out the fire.

Judaism is born in the wakeful resistance to the status quo. God does not want a covenantal partner who will blindly accept the injustices of the world. Hear the cry of the oppressed! Witness the pain of the afflicted! Agonize over the plight of the poor! Marx called religion the opium of the masses - - but, as Jonathan Sacks writes, "nothing was ever less an opiate than this religion of sacred discontent, of dissatisfaction with the status quo." The Jewish story is the story of "Abraham, then Moses, Amos and Isaiah, who fought on behalf of justice and human dignity, confronting priests and kings, even arguing with God [directly]... In Judaism, faith is not acceptance but protest, against the world that is, in the name of the world that is not yet but ought to be. It's aim is not to transport the believer to a private heaven. Instead, its impassioned, sustained desire is to bring heaven down to earth. Until we have done this, there is work still to do."²

If Judaism is born in the recognition of the chasm between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be,³ then *tzedakah* is our attempt to narrow that chasm. It is the refusal to blind ourselves to the suffering, the refusal to distance ourselves from those in pain. It is the idea that every single

1 Bereishit Rabbah 39:1

2 Sacks, Rabbi Jonathan, *To Heal a Fractured World*, p. 27.

3 see Rabbi Shai Held's exquisite opening d'var torah for Yeshivat Hadar.

person should be able to live a dignified life, free from oppression, poverty and degradation. And it is the notion that it is the responsibility of every one of us to make this claim a reality, rather than a naive fantasy. *Tzedakah* is the belief that we must do more than feel people's pain -- we must devote ourselves to eradicating the conditions that cause the pain. It is the belief that each one of us has the capacity to bring some measure of justice and understanding to the world, to tip the scales toward comfort and consolation, peace and understanding.

How apropos that we reach this moment just after reading Isaiah in the haftarah, when the prophet, full of rage, excoriates the people for their hypocrisy, for their inability to understand that ritual is meaningless if it does not come with a sincere turning of the heart and a genuine concern for the downtrodden:

*Is this the fast that I desire?
For people to starve their bodies?...
NO! This is the fast that I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness,
to untie the cords of the 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 him,
and not to ignore your own kin...⁴*

God does not want false acts of piety. God *demand*s justice, mercy and compassion. God scorns ritual action that is devoid of moral action. Today's rituals -- the prayers, the fast, the prostration -- must catalyze a conviction to change the way that we live. Short of that, you may as well go home now and eat a cheeseburger, because sitting here is empty of meaning.

Isaiah demands that we give a damn. The religious life is fundamentally incompatible with the apathy and complacency. The world cries out for us, but we hide behind ourselves pretending not to hear. The palace is on fire, but we push onward on our journey, barely taking note.

Isaiah felt the pain of the world. The rumbling of children's bellies kept him up at night. He heard the cry of the lonely and the brokenhearted. But nothing infuriated him more than seeing his fellow Jews, those bestowed by God with the legacy of eternal unrest, of social protest, luxuriating, counting their riches, feasting and drinking. Isaiah was crushed by their indifference to the widows and orphans, to the most vulnerable. He was scandalized by the ease with which people could recede into the luxuries of their own lives while the cries of the poor filled the marketplace. To Isaiah, this was a catastrophe of cosmic proportion -- revealing the existential failure of humankind.⁵ WAKE UP and LOOK AT THE WORLD! he shouted. *Ayeka!* Where are you? Where have you gone? There is a world on fire, and nobody, not even the descendants of Abraham, will look up from his personal affairs and take note! Who will feed the hungry, if not you? Who will hold the lonely, if you do not? Who will clothe the naked? Who will support the fallen? This is what it means to be a Jew in the world! Religion is not about comfort, it is neither about meditative rapture nor spiritual calm. It is about responsibility, courageous engagement -- it is about a revolution of the heart and a transformation of the world. I will never be whole, as a person, as long as I refuse to

4 Isaiah 58:5-7.

5 see Heschel, Rabbi Abraham Joshua, *Prophets*, intro.

hear the cries of the oppressed and understand that their pain is *my* problem. God cares deeply, and we must care deeply.

Nearly 3000 years have passed since Isaiah preached those words. Have we heard his cry?

Felicitas Martínez Barradas was 29 years old when she entered into the United States this summer with the dream of working as a housecleaner, so that she could make enough money to support her four young children. She, like hundreds of other immigrants, crossed the border in Arizona, ending up in a desert, “whose heat, insects and wildlife... make it some of the most inhospitable and rugged terrain on the planet.”⁶ Paralyzed by the over 100 degree sun, she died beneath a mesquite tree of heat exhaustion.

How many Mexicans need to die in the desert of Arizona for us to demand comprehensive immigration reform in this country?

Just last week, a young mother was walking with her 23 day old baby in a stroller in MacArthur Park -- just a few miles from here. A group of men drove by, apparently trying to punish a fruit vendor who had refused to pay a “gang tax.” Gunshots rang across the park -- they wounded the vendor; they killed the baby.

How many parents need to bury their children in this city, for us to recognize how unsafe the streets are when guns are so readily available, when so many kids find gangs to be the only structure of support in their neighborhood, when innocent people are caught in the brutal cycle of poverty, despair and crime.

I wonder what Isaiah would say if he was here to read about Felicitas Barradas or this precious child, granted only a few days to live before being shot for taking a stroll on a Saturday morning? I wonder what he would say about our government, which in the three years since it officially declared the conflict in Darfur to be genocide, has granted asylum to only 2 Darfuri refugees? I wonder what he'd say about us standing for that.

And what would he say about this war? This terrible, terrible war -- in which nearly 4,000 Americans and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis have died, in which we have squandered nearly every ounce of credibility we had in the world? I know what he would say about our government -- I wonder what he would say about us -- whose hundreds of billions of tax dollars support a war that is destabilizing the Middle East and endangering US and Israel. What would he say about the empty streets -- the fact that none of us are protesting? What would he say about our silence?

I am very interested in what happened to Moses after he fled Egypt -- *Mitzrayim*, the narrow place -- when he went to live in Midian as a young man. He was already awake to the slavery and degradation -- he had had his epiphany the moment he saw the Egyptian kill the elderly Israelite man. But then for many, many years Moses dwelt in the privileged passivity of Midian. He fell in love, built a family, herded sheep. He forgot the sounds of bondage, the slap of the whip on a child's back, the cries of desperation and humiliation from parents and elders. He wasn't a bad person, he just got busy.

6 NYTimes “At the U.S. Border, the Desert Takes a Rising Toll” 9-15-07.

It seems to me that we are like Moses, luxuriating in Midian, loving, losing, picking up the kids, working on our projects, making deals, building additions on our homes, while all the while the cries from Mitzrayim fall on deaf ears. It's not that we're heartless -- it's that we're busy. And distracted. And overwhelmed. But Heschel framed it as a question of existential import: "This is the decision which we have to make: whether our life is to be a pursuit of pleasure or an engagement for service... This is no time for neutrality. We Jews cannot remain aloof or indifferent. We are either ministers of the sacred or slaves of evil."⁷ Heschel, like King, held the unfashionable view that life is about the pursuit of justice, not the pursuit of comfort. "Our lives begin to end," King said, "the day we become silent about things that matter." What a message for our time. As Bob Herbert wrote last winter: "The anger quotient [in this country] is much too low. You can't stop America's involvement in a senseless war... [you can't propel any major social change] if your greatest passion is kicking back with pizza and beer and tuning in to "American Idol."⁸ We may feel powerless, but we don't lack power. Never before in history have we had so much power, as individuals, as a Jewish community. We don't lack power. *What we lack is will and creativity.* We need to think radical thoughts. We need to defy expectations. Isaiah ran naked and barefoot through the streets for three years in order to get people to pay attention to him.⁹ What are *we* willing to do?

For so many of us, life has become about the search for individual fulfillment. High Holy Days force us to reckon with the claim that life becomes meaningful only when we dedicate ourselves to making meaning. Our personal fulfillment will depend on our refusal to abandon the poor and the hungry, the lonely and the brokenhearted, to assume that they are someone else's problem. It will depend on our willingness to open our hearts, and our wallets, to treat the other like a neighbor, like a brother or sister, like a human being. Ultimately, it is *this* that will lead to a more satisfying life. But we don't do it because we are chasing satisfaction -- we do it because that is what it means to be a human being in the world -- to recognize the shared humanity, to connect with something enduring, to extend the self beyond the self.

It is said that one of the Lubovitcher Rebbes was so focused on his studies one night that he did not hear the cry of his baby from the other room. The Rebbe's father heard, went to the baby and held him until he fell back to sleep. Then the Rebbe's father went into his son, still focused on his books, and said 'My son, I don't know what you are studying, but it is not the study of Torah if it makes you deaf to the cry of a child.' To live a life of faith, of *tzedakah*, of meaning, is to attune your ears to even the silent cries of those living on the margins -- the sick, the poor, the vulnerable. It is to know that there is work for us to do. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: "As long as there is hunger, poverty and treatable disease in the world there is work for us to do. As long as nations fight, and [people] hate, and corruption stalks the corridors of power; as long as there is unemployment and homelessness, depression and despair, our task is not yet done."¹⁰

I am asking each one of you to believe today that you are not an accident in history. That the world needs *you* -- with your distinct gifts, talents, quirks. That there is something profoundly important that you are asked to do with your life -- that there is an impact that only you can make, comfort that only you can bring. That you have the capacity to make a difference in someone's life, and in

7 Heschel, Rabbi Abraham Joshua, "No Time for Neutrality."

8 Herbert, Bob, "The Lost Voice of Protest," NY Times, Jan. 18, 2007.

9 Isaiah 20:31.

10 Sacks, 82.

the world. And that it is your obligation to think courageously and creatively about what your task is, and *get working on it*.

When you pass a person in need, find a way to give *something*. When you learn that someone is sick, visit her and hold her hand. When you sense that someone feels invisible, tell him you care about what he has to say, and then listen. When someone you know is grieving, give her comfort, be present. When you see someone victimized and oppressed, do everything in your power to end his oppression. When you see that someone is lonely, invite her to your house for dinner. The Rabbis taught that providing hospitality for a stranger is “even greater than receiving the Divine presence.” Caring for the other is absolutely the essence of the Jewish religious life.¹¹ This is the deepest Jewish spiritual practice.

It’s true that life is short and any moment could be our last. Even for my 91 year old grandfather, life was too short. But as my friend who has triumphed over cancer (the one who has the good sex) says, it truly is in our hands. So I ask you today: will you lose yourself to transient superficialities, or will you work to bring a bit of peace into the life of someone who is tormented by poverty or illness, to bring solidarity and unity to a person suffering from exclusionary and unjust policies? Will the world look any better when you’ve left it? This is our great spiritual challenge --

Now it is our task to leave Midian and *step back into Mitzrayim*, to hear the cries and smell the pain -- to be appalled. And then to find the courage, the strength and the integrity to act with *holy butzpah* to bring about the world redeemed.

Ken yehi ratzon -- so may it be Your will.

¹¹ I am grateful for Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’s beautiful and courageous teachings in *To Heal a Fractured World*, which inspired and challenged my thinking on these matters, p. 5.