

## YOM KIPPUR MORNING 5770

**"JUSTICE is nothing but LOVE with legs<sup>1</sup>..."**

- Rabbi Johanna Hershenson

I recently heard Serene Jones, the president of Union Theological Seminary, an important progressive Christian graduate school in America, say the following about two very Jewish theological concepts, justice and love.

"JUSTICE is nothing but LOVE with legs..." That is to say, JUSTICE is what LOVE looks like when it takes social form. It bears repeating, JUSTICE is what LOVE looks like when it takes social form.

On Rosh Hashanah we creatively explored and analysed the psyche of our ancestor, Abraham, who learned the meaning of LOVE the hard way, but learned it nonetheless.

Like us, Abraham had childhood baggage that affected his choices in adulthood. He nearly lost everything before recognising the power of locked eyes, those fleeting moments of unadulterated love emanating from within, embracing the full essence of another.

There in all the brokenness and harshness of life on the planet, father prepared to sacrifice son, he can't. He can't because he's identified with his son's predicament in his own relationship with his father. Knowing what his son must feel like, LOVING his son in a way he's not LOVED in a long time if ever before, Abraham's LOVE conquers the cruel injustice of the moment. "JUSTICE is nothing but LOVE with legs..."

This morning we read in the Torah, *Atem nitzavim hayom, kulchem lifnay Adonai elohaychem... You stand today, all of you before Adonai your God... l'ovr'cha b'v'rit Adonai elohecha... to enter into a covenant with Adonai your God.*

On Rosh Hashanah we reflect, we judge, we make promises. *Sefer hachayim*, the Book of Life, is a draft book in which we sketch out our goals for the year to come. On Yom Kippur we present our final *Sefer hachayyim* draft and seal it. We enter into a renewed covenant with God, a renewed agreement with ourselves. What kind of human beings will we be this year?

Nearly five years ago, Thomas Friedman (well-known New York Times journalist) wrote a book about globalisation called *THE WORLD IS FLAT*. In it, he

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<sup>1</sup> Serene Jones, President Union Theological Seminary, on Bill Moyers Journal, "Faith, Justice, and Society."

ultimately suggests that both religion and enlightenment are passé. The only force that matters today is the economy.

His observations were frightening five years ago. Reading the book was akin to reading the story of the Golden Calf in the Torah. Just as the audience of the drama in the Torah sees the bigger picture and experiences frustration witnessing the Israelites bad behavior, readers of *THE WORLD IS FLAT*, felt overwhelmingly inadequately equipped to do anything about the inevitable victor in the struggle for power between people and an economy in which personal responsibility and liability have been replaced with corporate Frankenstein's for whom profit is the only bottom line.

The brokenness we witness today in the market is a clear indicator that the market's failure to be accountable to people reveals a real threat to democracy as we know it. Corporations remove people from the market.

Without people running the market, love and compassion and mercy are gone. Profit is the priority for corporations. While prosperity and economic empowerment are important and rightly valued in democracy, democracy's highest priorities must be the highest priorities of human beings. Human beings will value safety and general well-being above excess in profit. Corporations never will. They aren't designed accordingly.

Judaism acknowledges the power of greed and hunger and jealousy in the human animal when it describes our God of vengeance, rewarding and punishing at will. But, Judaism also acknowledges the power of love, compassion, and mercy when it describes our God of mercy who always forgives and builds on lessons learned and brought into fruition in new and different choices about the words and conduct we practice in the future.

The Niebuhrian maxim, a powerful progressive Christian understanding of the importance of democratic society, also teaches this very Jewish lesson. Paraphrased, *Our capacity for good makes democracy possible and our capacity for evil makes democracy necessary.*

The ancient Greek, Thucydides, taught through an exercise in logic that *power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.*

*Atem nitzavim hayom, kulchem lifnay Adonai elohaychem... You stand today, all of you before Adonai your God...the heads of your tribes, your elders and officer, every one in Israel, men, women, and children, and the strangers in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water...those who are*

*standing here with us today before our God, and equally with all who are not here with us today<sup>2</sup>.*

*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem...* Standing here today, all of us, on Yom Kippur... *l'ovrcha b'vrit YHWY elohaychem...* for the purpose of entering into a covenant with Adonai our God... is utterly and totally about taking ownership of our Judaism and employing it in the cultivation of our selves in the world today and in each and every generation to follow and not alone, but within the context of our participation in community, a congregation made up of individuals, from political leaders to wood choppers and everyone in between.

Yom Kippur is a transition from the introspection and reflection of Rosh Hashanah, allowing constructive feedback to emerge as the groundwork for goals and objectives in the coming year. *Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem...* is a call to the moment of transition... How deep is our love? What is the quality of our service? Where is our concern for those on the margins?

It's not enough each new year to say "I'm sorry; I'll do better next time." *Atem nitzavim hayom...* calls us to make a plan.

*For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, nor too remote. It is not in heaven nor beyond the sea. No it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it.*

No matter what the banks have done, no matter what government has failed to do, the TIKKUN, "the fixing" is in our mouths and in our hearts and our limbs and the choices we make with our words and our deeds.

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day that I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse; choose life that you and your descendents may live.*

"JUSTICE is nothing but LOVE with legs..." That is to say, JUSTICE is what LOVE looks like when it takes social form. Standing together, today, all of us, having emerged from the highly personal and critical audit taking of our own souls, our own annual accumulation of gratitude and regret, we commit now as a congregation, a collective, to choose life and blessing.

Why do we make this commitment to renew the ever-renewing covenant, *kulchem - kulanu*, all of us together? The great rabbinic commetator Rashi asks this question of the prayer, the *Barchu*, our very call to worship. He asks, why does the prayer call out to the collective of the Jewish people in the plural when *Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta* are in the singular?

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<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 29, *Atem nitzavim...kulchem*

Rashi answers that hearing and loving God are individual pursuits. Blessing God, that is, acknowledging divine, sublime, ineffable presence as it is *in AND/OR beyond* the universe must occur in public because the individual alone is too vulnerable to false images and impulses for personal gain to declare anything on behalf of all.

Remember the Niebuhrian maxim, only this time in Jewish-speak, the *yetzer hatov*, our capacity to exercise love and compassion, kindness and acceptance makes democracy possible. We do innately feel a connection to one another and want the best for the other.

The *yetzer hara*, on the other hand, our capacity to misunderstand and misrepresent in order to preserve our own sense of power and purpose in the universe makes democracy necessary. We do innately fear one another and sometimes even truly hate one another.

Therefore Rashi teaches us that we must study and pray in public. Our ideas must withstand some degree of public process as a means of separating the wheat from the chaff, the wisdom and practices we ought to value from the sometimes self-serving and sometimes misinformed conclusions we draw.

Society, our community, our congregation, concentric and overlapping rings of activity and organization, are all laboratories in which we experiment with ideas and anecdotes, hypothetical reasoning and practical efforts to live better with one another, including becoming better people, ourselves.

My favourite story in the Talmud climaxes when the rabbis of a certain academy reject the idea that God takes part in our discourse on what Torah teaches us in our own time. The rabbis quote this morning's torah reading, *Lo bashamayim hi - It is not in heaven...it is not beyond the sea...No it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it.*

When we ground ourselves in shared values, as a collective, a congregation, a community, we access this *davar*, this matter that is very near to us, in our mouths and in our hearts by choice in our gathering and in our discourse when we gather.

If a proposed idea or ideal is too funky, if it simply doesn't fit, natural processes in community and systems dynamics are the best checks and balances. Good ideas (like egalitarianism, inclusion, *Tikkun Olam* - social action, building a *Chevrah Kadishah*, celebrating milestone events, and offering companionship during more difficult times) stick. They carry weight and move us forward. Bad, but attractive, ideas (like exploiting human labour, power-mongering, and exemptions from

accountability) have fleeting success and then either dissipate or surrender to competing ideas.

*Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem...* calls us to gather and to engage. It's Yom Kippur and it's a full house today.

The challenge and the work come in the engagement, that is, the process of bringing together *kulchem* - all parts of the bell curve included - fringes and the mass in the center. *Kulchem* inherently houses a diversity of ideas and anecdotes, experiences and inherited wisdom into a finite space - inviting those ideas, anecdotes, experiences, and inherited wisdom to interact, to come into.

*Lovr'cha bvriv YHWH* - to cross, deliberately choose to enter into a communal covenant, communal in its shared commitment to the idea that there's something absolutely perfect out there beyond our grasp, call it God, call the World of Forms, call it inspiration or imagination... Your guess as to what it is, is as good as mine. What it *is*, isn't important.

The engagement, the commitment as a matter of principle to gather into relationship with one another in a discourse civilized enough to allow genuine interaction and discriminating enough to keep us honest and accountable for our debits and our credits.

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day...* Finally, this Yom Kippur morning Torah reading, speaks its greatest truth... *I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day...*

Not only is the wisdom and the challenge within grasp, the feedback is too! Heaven and earth are witness. Our actions matter. Our words matter. And the consequences, good and bad, exist here and now.

Sometimes we dodge them or ignore them altogether. Other times we drop them like hot potatoes with a shriek and dramatic gesture. In our more noble moments as human beings, we hold the consequences of our actions quietly and learn from them. No matter what, the consequences of our actions are here and now.

"JUSTICE is nothing but LOVE with legs..." That is to say, JUSTICE is what LOVE looks like when it takes social form. Our choice to engage is the social form of love. It is here in Temple Sinai just as it is in neighbourhood and school, city, and national democratic processes. It is true in our families, in our work, in our friendships, and in the manner we treat our bodies and the planet that sustains life as we know it.

Love is a serious thing. It holds us all in our struggles, external and internal. We might not be succeeding but our commitment to try and try again, to keep at it, makes all the difference in the world. The

quality of that engagement is always a matter of choice. Whether we think about it or not, *heaven and earth bear testimony*.

Engaging is LIVING and engagement is LOVING. LOVE taken seriously and realized is JUSTICE. The work and the opportunity are ours. May we recognize the value in the laborious practice of our ideals in each and every opportunity that presents itself. And when we don't recognize the value of practicing our ideals... Well, may those moments pass quickly and with as little collateral damage as possible. *Ken yehi ratzon* - May this be our will and commitment to one another as *ANACHNU NITZAVIM HAYOM KULANU* - as we build on the reflections and prayers we share together this Yom Kippur day to realize a more just and loving society.