

The story is told of a famous Rabbi named Zusya, an Orthodox Rabbi and an early Chasidic luminary, who died. When he died, Zusya went to stand before the judgement of God. He nervously awaited for God to appear and while he stood there he began thinking about his whole life and how little he had done. He began to imagine what God was going to ask him, “Zusya, why weren’t you more like Moses? Zusya, why weren’t you more like King David?” But, when God appeared, Zusya was taken aback. For all God asked of him was, “Zusya, Why weren’t you more like Zusya?”

The story is simple but straight to the point - we all have but one life to live and all God asks is that we remain true to ourselves and do the best that we can do with who we are, in this world. It doesn’t matter how others behave or act, what others think or do. We are responsible for ourselves and, ultimately, only ourselves in this world. The good we do, and even the harm we do, all rests upon our shoulders. It doesn’t matter who is watching, and who is not. At the end of our days, God will be asking us to reconcile only what WE did with this precious life that we were entrusted with.

And yet, our Judaism tells us that we cannot live for ourselves alone. While our actions are ours and ours to bear, we must always be cognizant of how we use our actions to help make other’s lives easier, better, and more livable. Judaism has a whole body of ethics that we ascribe to, in order to ensure that we are not living for ourselves alone. These ethics translate into our modern day values and help inform the way in which we, each one of us, ought to approach our lives and our world.

One of my favorite examples of this is the story of Abraham in the book of Genesis. He was sitting at the entrance to his tent when three strangers passed by. Immediately, he invited them in and began making them comfortable. He prepared a meal for them and treated them like royalty. Over time, we would come to call this the value of “*Hachnasat Orchim*” or “Welcoming in the Stranger”. Abraham didn’t know who they were, he had no reason to invite them in. But he saw that they were traveling and weary and he decided to give what he could to welcome them and make them comfortable. Abraham, the first Jew, teaches us that welcoming in the stranger is about seeing a need for others and taking our own action to fulfill that need.

Yom Kippur is a day all about examining our actions. Not only are we repenting for the sins of our past, we are also pledging to do good in the future, to be the best versions of ourselves possible. On a day when we are confronted with our own mortality, we know it is not too late, that we are not *Zusya*, standing at the judgement of God. Rather, we get to think about the time we are given and know that we can make right what has been wrong. Moreover, it is a day meant to inspire us to action, to not be complacent, and to insert ourselves and our voices into the work of justice that must be done.

Our Haftorah portion this morning comes from the book of Isaiah, one of the books of our Prophets. This rousing sermon that Isaiah gives inspires us to “not hold back” and to use the power of our voice to be lifted up like a shofar, so all may hear it. We famously read about the desire to fast, this Yom Kippur, NOT for nothing, but rather “to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved.” Similar to the work of Abraham and the value of *Hachnasat Orchim*, welcoming the stranger, we are advised to “share our bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home.”¹ Our Haftorah portion does not mince words. It is our responsibility to help others in need. Otherwise

¹ Isaiah 58: 6-7

all that we pray for, all that we do in order to cleanse ourselves, and become spiritually whole, is but an empty promise.

This year has been a tough year. There are many, many issues affecting our country and our world that can feel insurmountable at times. The immigration and humanitarian crisis at our border. The prolific availability of assault weapons that so easily enable mass shooters, threatening our school, our synagogues, our public spaces. The climate crisis that is reaching epidemic proportions and threatens to destroy our world, in the truest physical sense. These are issues that cannot and should not be ignored. And there are local issues too - the issues of poverty and homelessness, affecting thousands of people in the tri-state area. Hunger and food insecurity actually affects families locally out on Long Island, as well. Anti-Semitism continues to be a major issue in many of our schools, confronting our children and young adults in ways they likely feel unprepared for. And the list goes on.

No matter where you sit on the political spectrum of these issues, we can all agree that there is work that needs to be done to help heal our world and those who live in it. What matters most is that we recognize that there are humans out there, and a world out there that is suffering and that we must be part of the solution. We cannot sit idly by as others suffer and die from preventable tragedies and misfortune.

It can all seem overwhelming. But, you don't have to take it all on yourself, or think that you can single-handedly heal the world. Pirke Avot, the sayings of our ancestors, taught us "*Lo Alecha Haml'cha ligmor, v'lo atah bein chorein l'hibateil mimenah*" - you are not obligated to complete the work yourself, nor are you free to ignore it.² Even Judaism understands that we can start small and that whatever we can do matters, because it is better than doing nothing at all.

² Pirke Avot 2:21

Start small. Like Abraham, it could be just extending help to those who are right in front of you, who are suffering and could use a hand, whether you really know them or not. If what you are able to do, to help others, involves your immediate circle, dive in and feel good knowing that you are making a difference and easing the burden of someone you care for. Or, if there is no one around you in apparent need, there are plenty of organizations that will accept your donations to help alleviate the issues of hunger, or lack of clothing and basic necessities. You don't have to save the world, you just have to give a little bit to help ease someone else's pain. You can make donations to local food banks, to homeless shelters or to central collecting agencies like the Mid-Island Y or UJA Federation.

Or, you can think bigger - like volunteering. Recent studies have shown that volunteering to organizations that are meaningful to you, personally, give you an actual health benefit. Yes, you are helping others, but you are also helping to ease your own suffering - we're learning that volunteering and giving your time to others can reduce your own anxiety and depression and even lower your blood pressure. Participants in a [longitudinal study](#) on hormones and behavior, out of the University of Buffalo, completed a measure of charitable behavior. Over the next two years they provided assessments of stressful life events and physician-diagnosed physical ailments. Results indicated that charitable behavior released oxytocin in the participants' brain, thus creating more feelings of euphoria and fewer feelings of stress and anxiety³. It actually doesn't matter where you volunteer in order to get these rewards. The rewards always exist, when you give to others in a personable and measured way. Giving your time and energy to others is not only important for those that you are helping, it is important for your own well-being, too.

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0018506X13000202>

Think globally. There ARE ways to help the suffering of those who do NOT live in our community, but who need our help, nonetheless. And, there are ways to do it Jewishly, as well. The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the lobbying branch of our Reform Movement down in Washington DC, has numerous ways for you to get information or get involved in issues on a national level. With them, you can easily raise up your voice like the shofar, and take action with congresspeople to ensure that we make known our opinions on key legislation affecting these issues. You can also make donations to places that will receive funding to work on the issues that matter most to you. As a congregation, we could decide to become a Brit Olam community with them, working together on one of these global issues and making real and lasting change that can have an impact on those affected for generations to come.

Our tradition does not judge us on how big or how small our action is. It simply requires that we take action that we do more than study and pray. That we go out into the world and try, just try, to make it a better, more livable place for all who are in it. That, at the end of our days, we don't try and be someone else or be responsible for others actions, but rather that we did the best we could with what we had and what we knew we could do.

When the founder of Hasidic Judaism, the great Rabbi Israel Shem Tov, saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished, and the misfortune averted. Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezritch, had occasion for the same reason to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." Again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God, "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer and I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story of their suffering, and this must be sufficient."

And it was sufficient.⁴

Too often, we do not take action for fear that we, or the deed, are not enough. But we are. Every little bit of who we are, when we give to help others, is enough. It's easier to reason that we're not making a real difference unless we've done something big and grandiose. But our society and our Judaism demand more from us than excuses and complacency. It requires us, in times of need, to step in and be present and intercede for those who are unable, no matter how big or how small our action. Why? "Ki Gerim hayit'em b'aretz Mitzrayim." Because "As a people, we too have been strangers in a strange land⁵." Because, "Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh b'zeh." "All Israel is responsible for one another."⁶ Because, "B'makom sh'ayn anasheim, hishtadeil l'hi'ot ish." "In a place where there is no one acting like a human, strive to be a humanitarian⁷."

Moses Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish commentator, wrote in his Mishneh Torah, "Awake, O you sleepers, awake from your sleep!

O you slumberers, awake from your slumber!

⁴ Buber, Martin. <http://chippit.tripod.com/tales1.html>

⁵ Exodus 22:21

⁶ Talmud, Shevuot 39a

⁷ Pirke Avot 2:5

Search your deeds and turn in Teshuvah....

Look to your souls and better your ways and actions⁸”

While Maimonides was writing these words, specifically, about the Shofar, his reflections on the power of making noise can rouse a call in all of us. Today, on Yom Kippur, as we confront all that is real in our lives, all the mistakes we've made and all the ways in which we want to do better, we need to examine what we've done to help make the world a better place, for all. And on the day of our death, the day we are face to face with God, and God asks us if we were most like ourselves, doing the important work of our lifetime, what will you say? Will you be like Abraham, who runs to greet and comfort guests? Will you be like Rabbi Israel of Rizhin who uses information and spreads the word, in his own way, to help others avoid misfortune? Or will you be most like you, striving to be a human to all those around you who are in need?

There is so much in this world that needs healing and mending. And we, each one of us, can be an active part of helping to change our world for the better. Do not let your fast, on this day, be in vain. Rather, use it as a call to spur you towards action. Raise your voice up like the mighty Shofar and let your actions resound and reverberate so that all may see the good you do in this world. I pray, that for each of you, the world to come may be in the far, far and distant future. But when that day does come, we will not stand in fear of judgement. For we know that we did the best we could, and MORE. We did the best with what we were given in order to make the world a better, brighter, safer and more secure place for all. It is our job as Jews and as humans.

⁸ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4

Today is not an easy day. We deny our bodies the basic necessities of food and water. We stand and sit all day in prayer, for hours on end. And, for what? So that we can complain about how tired and cranky and hungry we are? No. That is not what God wants for us. It is so that we can remember that there are those out there who are suffering every single day and this, this might be just an ounce of what they experience. It is to remember that we have voices, deep within us that can be brought forward like a mighty shofar and call out loudly about injustice and hurt. It is to wake within us our discomfort and to realize that we can take action. It is to say that we have but one life to live, and at the end of it, the only person that we have to reckon with is ourselves. And, with God.

On this Day, this Holy of holies, I pray that each one of us feels sharply the pangs of discomfort. I pray that each one of us hears the call of action and shakes off our complacency. I pray that when standing in Judgement, we truly will feel no fear, for we know that we did the best that was inside of us. Today, on this Yom HaKippurim, this Day of Atonement, I pray that we know it is never too late to turn back, to mend broken hearts and souls and bodies, and to strive to make the world a kinder, brighter, and gentler place for all. Amen.