

Yom Kippur Sermon
5769
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There is something missing here this year.

For the last two years, three chairs draped with Israeli flags graced our bema and now there is one. This is why.

In the summer of 2006, three Israeli soldiers were kidnapped, two by Hezbollah and one by Hamas. The kidnappings of these 3 soldiers, Ehud Goldwasser, Eldad Regev and Gilad Shalit, precipitated the Lebanon war of two summers ago. This past summer as you may have seen on the news, the bodies of two soldiers, Goldwasser and Regev were returned in a Hezbollah prisoner swap. So one Israeli flag now graces our bema and two have been laid to rest. What has not been laid to rest is the hope that the third soldier, Gilad Shalit is still alive.

I was at an Aroma café, the Israeli equivalent of Starbucks, when the swap took place. In an impromptu national event, those around me had eyes glued to the tv in the coffee shop, waiting breathlessly. Hezbollah had refused to reveal the fate of the two soldiers until they were returned and the country was on pins and needles alternating between hope one or both would be alive and despair that violent terrorists were returned alive to Lebanon in order to guarantee this exchange. The news channel we were watching had cameras at the coffee shop talking to people watching the fate of Goldwasser and Regev revealed on the screen. As one coffin appeared on screen and then another, collective mourning began immediately. It is a moment I will never forget.

For the two soldiers, funerals were held immediately. And then Israel, a country so used to mourning, began to sit shiva for Goldwasser and Regev. Chances are you have been to a shiva house or sat shiva yourself. Shiva is traditionally for the mourner. Shiva is to encourage people to come comfort you, say kaddish with you, remember with you. So imagine if you went to a shiva house and the family asked you to stop worrying about them and turn your attention to someone else. That very thing happened in Israel this summer. In the creation of a new kind of shiva, the Goldwasser and Regev families who were visited by scores of people during shiva asked those who came to dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the release of the third kidnapped soldier, Gilad Shalit.

In their most broken state, these families instead, spoke words of repair, words of hope, words of action. They still believed, in spite of all they had been through, in spite of the funerals they had just had, in spite of frustrations and road blocks that they ran into during the two years of their loved ones captivities, they contained within them a will to work towards the release of the third soldier. And they shared this sentiment with everyone who came into their living room to comfort them.

At shiva, it was clear that even though their loved one was gone, they could help keep someone else's loved one alive.

To live life as to believe your actions could keep someone alive – Is it possible? At our very core, we feel otherwise, we have prayed for the healing of our loved ones only to lose them, we have donated money to a cause only to see it know greater enemies and yet... Whether it is literally true or not at every juncture we come to...what if we did live life that way?

I see it every day – I have seen congregants pick up the pieces of their life after losing a spouse to illness and raising awareness so others will not go through what they have had to go through, I have seen community leaders take the wrongs they see in society and take steps to right them, but so much is broken in our world – the wars we fight, the economies we struggle to stay afloat in, the threats to our health, the dangers that block our safety.

This summer, Temple Beth El's social action committee grappled with these very issues. Using Rabbi Avi Weiss's book Spiritual Activism as our guide, we pondered what are our causes and how to we help our Temple Beth El community find and articulate their causes. As Weiss writes, "Perhaps the most fundamental principle in Judaism is that every person is created in the image of G-d. Just as G-d gives and G-d cares, so too do we...the challenge is to unite that divine spark present in the human spirit." (Spiritual Activism, p. xviii)

To live a Jewish life is not for the faint of heart. This G-d in whose image we are created in is not a neutral image. It is a G-d that creates, changes, ponders and repairs. It is a G-d that sometimes brings on miracles and sometimes gets very disappointed. It is a G-d of action. Period. And with this G-d at our foundation, we have our experiences, personally and as a people that work in conjunction with our G-d. And a history like ours that includes words like Exodus, Inquisition and Holocaust in its vocabulary, the idea that actions are needed by humans in conjunction with G-d is the very core of our identity as Jews. Sometimes it takes the stories of those who have faced adversity and confronted it with strength to remind us to be strong. Yet, there is no reason to doubt that each one of us can live life as to truly believe our actions could keep someone alive, cure a disease, protect an innocent, better a planet. And to live every day with that knowledge – good days and bad days.

Where does that strength, that drive, that hope derive from? It is more than resilience. It is more than immunity. It is a wrenching away of what our high holiday prayerbook calls "Judgement's severe decree." If we are willing, we can use this day to be reminded of our strength, of our potential to act as if the world depended on actions. If we are willing, we can use the crimson colored high holy day prayer book we hold in our hands twice a year as a manual to understand how that can be.

There is hardly a day that we spend more time at synagogue than Yom Kippur. It is a long day made longer by the fasting. And it is full of ideas and concepts that are to spur us to repentance, to understand that G-d is very close to us and that forgiveness is just a word away.

But of our prayers, Rabbi David Forman says while there is "Human need for prayer, we must admit that often the prayers of our shared Jewish heritage leave us cold." But he suggests, our prayers are like anything else in life - hard work is needed to make such an effort worthwhile. If we work at Prayer it can be a Safeguard for memory and a means for self-improvement. (CCAR Journal, Spring 2008)

Unataneh Tokef, one of the most central prayers of the high holiday liturgy, is one of those prayers that needs hard work. The legend of the prayer attributes it to Rabbi Amnon of Mayence who was the victim of religious persecution and uttered these words in synagogue on the High Holydays and then died from his wounds, It is too scary to say alone and I like many rabbis have the whole congregation read it together. "On Rosh Ha Shanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed: How many shall pass on and how many shall come to be; who shall live and who shall die; who shall see ripe age and who shall not; who shall perish by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by hunger and who by thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague...But repentance, prayer and righteousness temper judgements severe decree. (Gates of Repentance, p.313.)

Rabbi Ed Feinstein suggests that this prayer is not just about this year but about this life. These are all the things we are going to experience in the course of our lifetimes. It reminds us, " the human condition is risky and its vulnerable and fragile and painful and difficult. But what makes this prayer Jewish is it does not end on this note of vulnerability. The prayer says there are three things in the world you do control – Teshuva tefillah tzedakah – teshuva – your character tefillah – your prayer and tzedakah – your acts of righteousness. As Feinstein puts it, "No matter what life does to you, you always have the freedom to assign a meaning to life."

That is what the Goldwasser and Regev families did in the midst of their loss. They assigned meaning to it. They said our losses can be a vehicle for the release of Gilad Shalit. And inspire the tireless work of Gilad's own father, Noam Shalit, who is in the press for one thing or another he has done to keep Gilad's plight central to the relevance of the world. He has handed a letter for his son to French President Nicolas Sarkozy to get to a leader of Hamas who promised to deliver the letter to Gilad. He has gone to court to protest truces with Hamas until his son is freed.

Do we look at Noam Shalit, and pity him for his still fruitless quests or do we learn from him that we can live life in this way - that the very world depends on us to make it better? Can one person's action change their world and the world at large? Can we live life in a way that we act as if our actions can change the world for the better?

And what happens to us when we do act and it seems not to work?

While the Goldwasser and Regev families uttering the words of the mourners kaddish this summer, a book was taking Israel by storm. By David Grossman it is a fictional account of a woman and the loss of her son. The book *Isha borahat Mibesora* (English title: Until The Ends of the Earth) and the premise is this:

In Israel, when a soldier is killed a team of people from the army come to the house to deliver the news. The soldier son of the book's heroine, Ora, is leaving to take part in a major military operation, and Ora feels if she is not ever at home to greet the army team, if she stays away from home, she will keep him alive. So she leaves her house and travels around Israel, all in an attempt to never be at home to greet the team that will bring news of her son's death.

But there is a story behind the book and it is not fiction. It is fact, it is real life and it is heartbreaking. David Grossman, the author had a son Uri fighting in war that the soldiers' kidnappings precipitated. And believe it or not, this author felt he was keeping his son alive by writing the book. As Grossman said, " I had a feeling, a hunch - or more precisely, a wish - that the book I was writing would protect him." It was not to be. On August 12, 2006, in the final hours of the Second Lebanon War, his son, Uri was killed in South Lebanon ...But after the Shiva Grossman returned to the book to finish it.

Imagine if we lived life in a way like this - Believing our actions make a difference. And even when they it feels like they don't, still going on, like the Goldwasser and Regev families to say, there are more lives to save. Let's save them. Believing, like those who have lost loved ones to disease, to say there the disease must be eradicated, and even when they take away our loved ones, to say, there are more cures to be found. Let's find them. Believing there are wrongs in this world that we can speak of from this bema, like our congregants who take them one, and even when they seem to large to affect, to say, let's make a difference.

It is an image of work and action and reflection. It is an insistence that we cannot sit idly by if we are to truly act in the image of G-d and to carry out the teshuvah, tefillah, and tzedakah we are urged to do at this time on the Jewish calendar.

And as this Rosh Hashanah of 5769 dawned, two months after shiva for the other two families – the father of Gilad Shalit, the third of the three kidapped soldiers asked the world in the midst of their busy lives to stop and send a new years card to his son Gilad, in captivity. It is action – hopeful and hopeless at the same time. It is action of a man ceaselessly and tirelessly working simultaneously knowing his actions may be no fruit to bear or they may bring everything. And in each of those actions, he has reached out – to world leaders, to Israeli citizens, to the world – His actions are not in a vacuum – they are actions that inspire a world.

Next year, may there be no need for this chair. Next year, may Gilad Shalit celebrate 5770 with his family, alive, whole and well and in peace. May we know such miracles and may we

understand our potential to witness them and our strength to persevere if we do not. And may this be G-d Will – Kehn Yehi L'Ratson. Shanah Tova.