

**“How do you make a difference in the world?” – Sermon – Yom Kippur Morning
October 9, 2008 - Rabbi Larry Karol**

It was a busy Sunday afternoon at home, doing laundry, cleaning, and straightening the house for guests that were coming the next day. Both parents looked at each other in slight despair as their young daughter and son had finished their chores and came running to them with the question, “So what do we do now?” Thinking quickly, one parent opened up a favorite magazine, flipped to a particular page, ripped it out, and cut it into small pieces, and said to the children, “On the page that I just took from the magazine is a picture of the world. I want the two of you to find a place where you can work to put the world back together, like a puzzle.”

As we watch events in our nation and throughout the world, we probably feel, from time to time, that the world is in pieces and needs to be put back together with some major improvements added in the process. We have been poignantly reminded, over these last few weeks, how something that happens in one part of the world can affect life somewhere else. The American financial crisis has had repercussions around the world, and has been reported in the media in other countries almost as much as in the United States. When I was in Israel in February, even the doctors in the emergency room of Ichilov Hospital wanted to talk with me about American politics, especially when I told them that I was from New Hampshire. In my hotel room in Tel Aviv, I was able to watch television reports of the Maine caucuses. In speaking with renowned activist and author Jim Wallis at the University of New Hampshire last year, he told me that he knew that issues such as dealing with HIV/AIDS around the world and easing the plight of refugees in Darfur had brought together the likes of Senator Barack Obama and the much more conservative Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas. Issues such as poverty and preserving the environment unite people of various faith groups, including Evangelical Christians, more than ever before. The world is a puzzle, and it seems that we are finding more partners

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with diverse beliefs and ideologies who are finally willing to coordinate their efforts to put the puzzle of the world back together.

I am gratified to know that a desire to engage in **TIKKUN OLAM**, repairing the world, starts right here in our community and congregation. Last May, I invited members to join me in a discussion under the title of **YACHAD – together**. I asked the participants several questions: “How do we honor people? How do we honor creation? What are the elements of and what are your images of an ideal community? What is your personal Jewish mission? How would you apply all of your answers to Temple Israel?” Here are some of the responses from the group that expressed a desire to engage in **TIKKUN OLAM**, repairing the world: “Have empathy/sympathy for others; listen; take responsibility; respect elders; help in times of trouble or sickness; recycle and conserve; share food in troubled times; do acts of kindness and generosity; be an emissary and a light to others; engender understanding among members in Jewish teachings and create a deeper understanding of Judaism in the greater community; be involved, care and stay connected; be giving to the local community.”

That meeting led me to reexamine the Jewish principles that guide us to make a difference in the world. The books **RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION: A JEWISH CALL FOR JUSTICE** by Rabbi Or N. Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, and Margie Klein, and **JUDAISM AND JUSTICE: THE JEWISH PASSION TO REPAIR THE WORLD**, by Rabbi Sidney Schwarz, both suggest that Judaism offers two imperatives which can lead us to action. One is based on the story of the Exodus, which teaches us to identify with those who are oppressed and in need because, as the Torah repeats over and over, “we were slaves in the land of Egypt. The other imperative comes from the biblical description of receiving the Torah and divine

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guidance at Mt. Sinai, making our acceptance of the values we prize even now both a moral AND a spiritual experience.

We don't have to take the Torah literally to understand what “Exodus” and “Sinai” mean. There is something in congregational and community life that leads us to extend a hand to people in need – the Exodus imperative - and to consider the feeling and spirit we have inside when we do reach out to offer our help – as if we are, at least symbolically, standing at Sinai once again, sensing a unique feeling and presence inside ourselves and within the community. It is good to be reminded from time to time that, by doing good work in the community and by making a difference in the world, we not only help others through our efforts but also find our better selves. The Torah and Haftarah readings for Yom Kippur are full of reminders regarding how we can fulfill our mission of putting the puzzle that is the world back together. This afternoon, the portion from Leviticus Chapter 19 commands us to love our neighbors and the stranger as ourselves, to respect our elders, to be honest at work and at home, to revere our parents, and to seek true justice and fairness. We learn from that passage not to steal or show favoritism or harbor prejudice due to someone's background or engage in slander or libel or bear grudges. In this morning's Haftarah portion, the prophet Isaiah declared to his community that honoring both the “Exodus” and “Sinai” imperatives – that is, by joining together for worship and contemplation with the right intention and by doing good works as a community, they could make a difference in their own world. Isaiah proclaimed, “If you remove the chains of oppression, the menacing hand, the malicious word; if you make sacrifices for the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted; then shall your light shine in the darkness, and your night become bright as noon: the Eternal One will guide you always – you shall be called ‘repairer of the breach, restorer of streets to dwell in.’”

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The Torah reading for this morning from the book of Deuteronomy portrays all the people standing together to hear a reminder of their personal and communal mission, including this declaration: “For this commandment is not too hard for you, nor too remote – it is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it.”

In recent weeks, I asked congregants via email to respond to the question, “How do you try to make a difference in the world?” I want to share with you some of the responses I received. In these statements are echoes of Exodus and Sinai and Isaiah and Deuteronomy, and, most definitely, practical suggestions for what we can do to touch one life or the entire world. Here are some of your words about what you do in your lives to make a difference, showing that these teachings are, in fact, in our mouths and our hearts and we can do them:

- **Everyday, I try, first, to set an example through my behavior of acceptance and love. Second I try to make a difference by helping people see the world through the eyes of others – that everything is not a soap opera, that people have different needs and abilities, that our place in the world is enhanced by everyone else’s presence and beliefs. That the only way we will ultimately be successful, is if everyone else is successful as well.**
- **To make a difference in the world, make a conscious effort to give something (anything) back to your community, like volunteering at the Dover Friendly Kitchen one evening a month and assisting and giving to local food banks, schools, libraries, town clean up projects, and helping neighbors who could use a hand.**
- **I feel I make a difference in the world by raising my children to respect others and to appreciate that others have a voice that must also be heard. This also helps them to discover they have their own voices. I try to move them from thinking**

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solely of themselves to thinking of others and being responsible, caring and thoughtful about their place in the world.

- **If you can't say anything nice about someone, -- say nothing. It is easy to criticize.....but a kind word is worth a lot.**
- **Before you can make a difference in the world, "you must be the change that you want to see in the world" as Gandhi says. It all starts with yourself. If you want to see peace, be more peaceful. If you want to see love, be more loving. If you want to see health, take better care of yourself.**
- **Integrity is key. Somebody once described integrity as having congruence between what you think, what you say, and what you do, and hopefully having clarity about all of that.**
- **To make a difference in the world, seek conciliation instead of confrontation, because it will bring you respect of both partners and competitors.**
- **I try to make a difference in the world daily by trying to be an example of giving for my children: to Temple, at local schools, for our local library, and for other organizations and causes. Giving to charities and giving action to non-profits makes a difference. Mentoring for our children also includes showing them good listening skills, showing them ways to be open to, and non-judgmental of, others.**
- **I try to make a difference by being a caring and compassionate parent -- always being there and showing interest in my children's activities, achievements and their areas for improvement; making sure that they know that they come before other things in my life, giving them room to grow and respecting their privacy; promoting them to be the best that they can be.**
- **As an educator in the town where I live, I feel I have the most rewarding job of all and that I have the opportunity to impact my community, friends and family**

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daily! My goal is to continue to make a difference in my students, staff and families' lives on a daily basis.

- I try to make a difference by making my home a safe and substance-free place for teens to congregate, stocking it with food, drinks, ping pong, etc.**
- I try to make a difference by advocating for more communal health and safety measures, and promoting good personal and public health.**
- I teach my students in school small steps, such as not fighting with siblings, giving your parents an unmasked hand, or making quality visits to grandparents. These are ways that young people can learn that small steps lead to big steps that can make a difference.**
- I show my appreciation to my community by giving my time and efforts at our school and serving on our local Recreation board.**
- I try to make a difference by teaching my students how to organize their ideas when writing and speaking, so that they can gain confidence in expressing themselves with positive words.**
- Martin Luther King, quoting nineteenth century pastor Theodore Parker, said, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe: the arc is long one...and from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.” I think that is true. There is no guarantee that justice, fairness, and right will prevail. Likewise, there is no guarantee that people will be intelligent, thoughtful, and reasonable. Nonetheless, if one continues to put these values out there, the tendency is for them to prevail. People want to do the right thing. Hopefully, people and society evolve in a positive manner. Certainly, it is two steps forward and one step backward. Nonetheless, we are making progress.**

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- **I try to make a difference by advocating for and promoting religious tolerance, respecting differences and supporting similarities at work and at school, particularly in a local environment in which Jews are in such a minority.**
- **I feel that if I try to see G-d in every one I meet and by my actions and words they may see G-d in me, then I feel I have made a difference. I also believe that I make a difference through prayer. I pray several times a day for those who need healing and comfort, for peace in the world, for Israel, for the souls who have passed on, for my loved ones and friends, for the Temple community and I always give thanks for blessings each day and answers to prayer.**
- **The recent notion, "pay it forward" is wonderful, as is "practice random acts of kindness". You are the one who most benefits.**
- **I try each day, hopefully in each action, to be kind and do the best that I can. For me this means caring for my family mindfully and trying to interact with people in the world in a kind and pleasant manner.**
- **I make a difference by being a caring friend, having positive and friendly interactions as I go about my daily business, even with strangers, shopping at small and local businesses, and volunteering for Hospice. I do all of these things for selfish as well as altruistic reasons: I want to have good friends, friendly community, good local businesses, and good leaders. As for hospice, as I help people going through the passage of death, I hope to gain a better understanding of it and strength to face it in my own life.**
- **The way I try to make a difference is to smile, greet, and acknowledge each person I come into contact with during the day. It is my way of saying, "you are here, you are valued and may your day be a good one."**
- **Offer yourself as a good listener and an empathetic ear when others are in need of comfort, or are simply in need of someone to talk to. No matter how busy a**

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schedule each of us maintains in what we do in the world, we can drop what we are doing for a few minutes just for the value of simple human companionship.

This can be a priceless moment in the life of another at a time of need.

- If we all followed the golden rule, “Do not unto others as you would not have others do unto you”, could there be a greater way to make a difference in the world?
- No reason to try to reinvent the wheel here. Follow the teachings of the Torah, Love G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might, and do the same to your neighbor. This is best done with your eyes closed at first, so that any lessons we may have inadvertently learned to hate anyone remotely different than us, do not affect our abilities to love our neighbor. If people appreciate your kindness, ask them to pass it on, then pray that you have done enough to make this a better world for the children to come.
- The aphorism is true: your thoughts become actions, your actions become habits, your habits become character, and your character becomes destiny.

After reading these statements from 23 members of our community, I felt gratified to see teachings of our heritage come alive on many levels. It is good to see that we also put these teachings into practice as a congregation so that we can make a difference in our own local world. During these High Holy Days, we are engaged in a community effort to restock the shelves of the Dover Food Pantry by bringing grocery bags full of food and other items that will go a long way to help people in need in the Seacoast. Members of the greater Temple Israel community also prepare and serve a meal at the Dover Friendly Kitchen once a month throughout the year. What I would like to see, to keep us on the path of engaging in this mission of making a difference, is that we make these promises to ourselves as a community:

- 1) I invite each of you to share – either with your name or anonymously – how you

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make a difference in the world, or suggest a cause that you believe congregants should support. I will create a column in the Keshet Newsletter to feature your thoughts and suggestions.

2) We can create a social action discussion group to study short and meaningful Jewish texts on working for justice in the world, perhaps looking at chapters of the books to which I referred earlier in my sermon. I will provide the bagels and coffee and order the books, just come and join me.

3) We can create a plan, as a congregation, to join together for two more major efforts during the year like the food drive – one for Chanukah and one for Passover, that will bring to light one of the themes of those holidays and give us an opportunity to make a difference together.

There is so much we can do with our words, with our hands, with our hearts. The Torah reading for this morning directs us to “choose life.” We can choose life for ourselves, for our community and for the world through our best efforts to make a difference.

Now, let’s return to the story that began my sermon. Within 10 minutes after receiving their impromptu puzzle, the children came back to their parents with the magazine page perfectly reassembled and taped together. The parents were astonished – they asked, “How did you put that back together so quickly?” The children replied, “There was a picture of a man and a woman on the back of the page. We discovered that once we were able to put each of them back together, then the world came out just right.”

On this Yom Kippur and in this New Year, let us remember that what we do for ourselves to put and keep ourselves together has the possibility and power of setting the world right and making a difference. So may it be—so may we do—and let us say Amen.