

It was two days after Rosh Hashanah as the rabbi was taking advantage of some peaceful time following the New Year. It was gratifying to see congregants, long-time local community members, extended family and guests come together for prayer and celebration. Fortunately, the rabbi’s Yom Kippur evening sermon was already complete, so he could begin to focus on the “home stretch” of High Holy Day homiletics (or sermon writing) – his D’var Torah for Yom Kippur morning. Since he didn’t deliver a sermon on Yom Kippur afternoon, but only in the morning, he knew that he had many issues and values which he could discuss. The Torah and Haftarah readings of Yom Kippur are ripe with significance and meaning. In the morning, the passage from Deuteronomy Chapters 29 and 30 speaks of how divine direction and guidance – in the form of the Torah’s commandments – are not far away from us, but in our mouths and hearts, so that we can easily find a way to put them into practice. We read every year in that section the command to choose life and good over death and evil. The proclamations in the morning Haftarah, from Isaiah Chapter 58, are intended to make us squirm just a bit, reminding us that ritual is important and valuable only when it moves us to action. It’s not that Isaiah claimed that rituals were unnecessary and meaningless, but that our observance wasn’t complete unless we were moved to extend our helping hand to people in need. Isaiah asserted, in his own special way, that doing mitzvot in the community brings to fruition the values that Shabbat and our holidays can teach us. Participating in prayer and community celebrations can lead us to act upon Jewish moral principles, which are also universal, such as kindness, appreciation of nature, freedom, learning, understanding, combating hatred and providing all people with a sense of hope for the future. On Yom Kippur afternoon, the Torah reading from Leviticus Chapter 19 characterizes what it means for us and for our actions to be holy, culminating in the goal of loving our neighbor and the stranger - all people - as

ourselves, always recognizing our common humanity. Finally, the Haftarah portion from the book of Jonah tells the story of a man that some commentators call the quintessential “anti-prophet.” Jonah had no compassion for the people to whom he was directed to announce their need to repent for societal wrongs because they were not Hebrews like he was. He refused to carry out his prophetic mission of telling them to change their behavior for the better. Yet, as a prophet, he HAD to do what he was told to do, and, against his will and through the graces of a very large fish, he found himself where he didn’t want to be – near the city of Nineveh, the very destination he was trying to avoid. At that point, he had no choice but to deliver the message to the people, who did listen to his warning and change their ways. All of these portions combined encourage us to think carefully about what we do every day, calling on us to choose life and good, compassion and understanding, holiness and honesty, forgiveness and love.

Now back to the rabbi. He had been reading in recent months books that shed light on what it means to be a responsible member of the human family. He always found books on leadership in business and the corporate world to be helpful in suggesting how any one of us can make a significant and lasting impact through keeping promises, setting an example, communicating and connecting with other people as partners, and giving without the need for recognition. A book by Rabbi Joseph Meszler, *A Man’s Responsibility*, highlighted “mitzvot of manhood” that direct Jewish men of the 21st Century to seek Jewish wisdom that is still relevant today, to be an equal partner at home, to serve as a role model and exemplar of Jewish values, to forgive others and themselves where being “very good” and not “perfect” is acceptable, to show generosity and compassion, and to strike a balance between work and personal time with family and friends. A book which the rabbi had read about volunteering in congregations noted that values like courtesy, efficiency, sensitivity, cultivation, affirmation and gratitude need to

be imbedded and intrinsic within the ongoing flow of synagogue relationships, programs, celebrations and gatherings. Another book sat on the rabbi’s desk, *How to Do good and Avoid Evil*, by Hans Kung and Rabbi Walter Homolka, which is an expression and outgrowth of a worldwide movement to create a global ethic for all people. The authors presented six core principles that we all can and should follow:

- 1) Every human being must be treated humanely.
- 2) Do not do to another what you would not want to be done to you.
- 3) Commit yourself to peace, creating a culture of nonviolence and reverence for all life.
- 4) Commit yourself to creating a culture of justice and a just economic order.
- 5) Commit yourself to creating a culture of tolerance and a life in truthfulness and honesty.
- 6) Commit yourself to defending equal rights, creating a culture of partnership between men and women.

The rabbi was sitting in his office at the end of the day after looking through some of these books he had read in the last few months, trying to determine just what he could say on Yom Kippur morning that would offer a basis not only for discussion but also for action and combined efforts to make a difference in the community and the world. He was, for the moment, overloaded and exhausted. If he could only close his eyes for a few minutes, maybe he could think more clearly....

Suddenly, he heard the Temple doorbell ring. He must have dozed off for a few moments, he thought. He ran to the door and saw a man with jet white hair and a short beard, wearing a flannel shirt and a jeans and boots, waiting patiently to enter.

“Sorry, sir, I was asleep for a few minutes and finally heard you ringing the doorbell. Welcome! How can I help you?”

The man looked around for a moment and said, “I came here to, well, to talk to you.”

“Really? To talk to me?” asked the rabbi. “How could you possibly know who I am to be someone you might want to talk to?”

“Word always gets around, and after arriving in your area, it wasn’t hard to find at least one place that had a computer connected to the internet so I could make my way here. Nice website, by the way!”

“Thank you! So, what’s your name?”

“My name is Shai. I come from rather far away, but that’s not really important. I didn’t come for help for myself, I came to help you.”

“Me? What would make you think that I need some help?”

“Well,” said Shai the stranger, “You are a rabbi, and it is between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – and you still have one sermon to go, don’t you? I looked through your window and saw the pile of books on your table in your study. You did some good reading and probably found a great deal of wisdom. Is that what you were looking for?”

“No, not just wisdom,” said the rabbi. “I wanted to find some rules to live by that could lead to doing mitzvot and showing kindness and compassion in the community.”

“Well, I know something about that – did you take a close look at the Haftarah for Yom Kippur morning?” asked the visitor.

The rabbi responded insistently, “Why, yes! I know that Haftarah nearly backwards and forwards after reading it on Yom Kippur for over 30 years. I know – Isaiah, Chapter 58 – it’s an ethical treasure! Not many passages strike the right balance between ritual and responsibility. This is one of the best – ‘Is

not this the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to clothe them? And never to hide yourself from your own kin – which means any human being – then your light shall blaze forth like the dawn.’ That passage is like a program list for a Social Action committee. At our congregation, we are already collecting food year round for the local food pantry and serve once a month at the local kitchen. We have collected scarves, mittens, hats and coats to give to adults and children who need warmth in the winter. We have collected shoes that could still be worn for Soles 4 Souls. Our members give individually to worthy causes and do good work as a congregation.”

Shai the stranger was impressed, “You have done a lot to bring this biblical passage to life, to live out the teaching of that prophet. And the most important things you said was that ‘kin’ means everyone. Your religion – our religion – teaches that we are all part of the same family. Every single person is a manifestation of God, made in the divine image. No matter what your status in society, people who have more or less than you, or the same as you, share with you the fact of being human and represent a significant part of creation. The more you recognize God’s presence – God’s face – in the face of other people, the more God will be present within you.”

“I have thought about that a lot,” said the rabbi. “Shai, what about people who are so full of themselves that there is no room for God? What do I do about them?”

“Maybe you can help them find God inside them,” Shai replied. “Perhaps they are hurting and they have forgotten about that touch of the divine that resides

in their soul. You may not always succeed, but trying can help people find their own light within.”

“I try as much as I can, and sometimes I do make a breakthrough – that saying of the rabbis ‘When you save one soul, it’s as if you have saved an entire world,’ reminds me to extend my hand to one person at a time. Another part of that Isaiah passage that I have trouble discussing sometimes is the part about Shabbat – it seems like it is too much of a refocus on ritual.”

Shai thought for a moment, and said, with patience and confidence in his voice, “Think about the themes of the Sabbath – on a complete day of rest, you have the opportunity to focus more on your own needs and those of family, friends and community. So, if you use your iPhone, Blackberry, or computer, on that day, use it not for business but to further friendships and family ties. Take a few moments to step out of your busy schedule and find your true self – remember that Shabbat as a day of rest makes everyone equal in that rest. Celebrating Shabbat as a remembrance of creation means that we should pay attention to how we can preserve our world. Observing Shabbat as a remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt means that we should see ourselves as leaving slavery for freedom many centuries ago, so that, now, we can and should work for freedom for people who are oppressed all over the world and we should show mercy to people who may be enslaved or stuck in their position in life for one reason or another. When we are inspired to work for justice, to make the world as fair as we can make it, then light can blaze forth, and night can become as bright as noon.”

The rabbi was enraptured by what he heard. “Shai, maybe you can give my sermon on Monday morning! That was amazing!”

“No, I will leave the rabbi’s task to the rabbi. There are a couple of other thoughts I should share that you might want to include. First, I have been

following in the news about people at the opposite sides of political conflict calling each other names and using some rather unfortunate and extreme imagery. Racism, perhaps, but even worse is when legitimate opinions are called lies and when, in order to dismiss the other side, all you have to do is compare your opponent to the most diabolically evil human beings ever to walk the face of the earth. That has got to stop. And one more thing – the wheels of change move slowly. Sometimes it takes months, sometimes years – even centuries- for humanity to step forward and demonstrate the results of true humility, generosity, justice and compassion. No matter how long it takes, stay committed to that cause and keep moving in that direction. You’ll make it to your desired destination and you’ll learn a lot along the way.”

The rabbi expressed his gratitude to his guest, “Shai, thank you so much for all of your wisdom – and your encouragement. I have a sermon to finish, I suppose. I should probably get back to it.”

“You will,” answered Shai, “but first you have to wake up.”

“Wake up....what do you mean?” The rabbi was now totally confused.

“Rabbi, ask me my full name....”

“Your full name- let’s see, Shai – Y’sha-yah – Y’shayahu – that would be....Isaiah – THE ISAIAH?”

“I knew you’d get it – yes, it’s Isaiah.....time to wake up.”

The rabbi was awakened abruptly by the phone ringing. It was the local jail. Someone was in dire need of a visit. And he knew there were other people to see as well. So, Shai – Isaiah? Even if it was only a dream, there was something crucial and urgent in what the rabbi thought he heard – in a land of freedom, we have the chance to fulfill our responsibility to help people in need, to ease hunger for people all over the world, to provide relief and shelter, to guarantee as best we can equal access to health care, and to find common

ground and foster civility with people with whom we disagree because there is so much to be accomplished. Isaiah’s words echoed in the rabbi’s mind – and heart, “If you remove...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. God will guide you always.”

Those are words we need to hear again and again, the rabbi thought, not just on Yom Kippur, but every day. So, for a new year, it was and is his hope that every congregation could unite behind a banner of compassion, humility, selflessness, justice, equality and peace. So may WE do, once again, in 5770 – and let us say Amen.