



You Are Served & You Will Serve Others

Kol Nidre 5780 / 2019 Rabbi Dara Frimmer

There's a great story in our tradition about a rabbi who walks down the street and notices a man with two heads. (Menachot 37a)

Most of us might ask how that person came to be, but the rabbis are interested in a different question: "If a person has TWO heads, how many pairs of tefillin does he need to wear?"

Such is the curiosity of the halachic mind.

Tefillin, also known as phylacteries, are leather boxes, filled with prayers on parchment, attached to straps, traditionally bound on our heads and arms during morning prayer.

So, does the two-headed man need one set of head tefillin...or two?

Now, in order to answer that question, the rabbis need to ask another question, "Is this one person with two heads, or two people who share one body?"

Why is this important? Well, if it's one person with two heads - you only need one set of tefillin. But, if it's two people sharing one body, each head needs its own.

A midrash, from a different compilation, tells us that King Solomon, was confronted with this exact same problem. What does he do? He pours hot water on one of the heads...*and waits to see if both scream*. If both scream, we have one person with 2 heads.

What *looked* to be distinct and separate turns out to be intertwined and inextricable.

In the mid-20th century Rav Soloveitchik, a luminary in his time, turns this story into a teaching about Jewish Peoplehood. Though the Jews have spread out across the globe, we are still united. In other words, WE are one body with many heads -- which means when a Jew screams in Israel, a Jew living in Los Angeles should feel that pain. When a Jew screams *anywhere* in the world, 14 million Jews should feel a twinge.

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Last year, Kristen Lonner was hit by a car. After she recovered, she told a story about #beingisaian. She talked about the communal response she experienced, the overwhelming number of visitors to her hospital room, playdates and meal trains set up for her family, support for her husband...the list of actions went on and on.

The testimony was powerful because it wasn't a story about how her fellow Isaian kept her in their "thoughts & prayers," though I'm sure they did.

It was powerful because we could hear and feel the impact of every intentional action that a member of our community took to ensure she (and her family) felt embraced and cared for.

It was powerful and emotional, because deep in our gut, God forbid, we find ourselves that vulnerable and exposed, we hope the same people will show up for us.

So how DOES that happen? How DO we create relationships that bind us, one to another?

The answer is simple: It starts with us.

Of course, there is that story about a rabbi who preaches on the high holidays to her community "Who wants **change**?" and everyone raises their hand. Soon after, she asks, "Who wants **to** change?" All the hands go down. Finally, she asks: "Who wants **to lead the change**?" and they all file out. Shana Tova!

THIS is the season of change. We say we want it, though we are not certain if we want to do it. But if we want this synagogue and its members to be a *kehillah kedoshah* - a sacred community of support - not just for ourselves, our families, or our best friends, but for everyone who calls themselves Isaian, then I'm telling you: We ALL need to be leaders of change.

And the first change has to be around choice and obligation.

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For all the gifts we receive from Reform Judaism -- informed choice, radical inclusion, ritual creativity -- one of our greatest challenges is around the concept of *hiyyuv* - the Hebrew word for obligation.

Hiyyuv defines, in classic rabbinic language, which behaviors are optional and which ones are mandatory. A child whose parent has died has a *hiyyuv* to say Kaddish. A Jew over the age of 13 has a *hiyyuv* to fast on Yom Kippur and hear the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

Hiyyuv answers the question, "What if I don't *want* to pray today?" by reminding you, *it doesn't matter what you feel*. Prayer is an obligation. Other people are counting on you (literally) to make a *minyan*, a gathering of 10, so get up and go do it. *Hiyyuv* is a built-in insurance policy that you won't stand alone when you need to recite the Mourner's Kaddish.

If our community feels no *hiyyuv* or obligation, then we are sustained *only* on the choices each individual makes. And as beautiful and powerful as choice can be, it leaves us vulnerable. A community built entirely on choice depends on people's good will, expansive hearts, and open schedules, and that, in the 21st century, is a risk we may not want to take.

Hiyyuv establishes a framework that openly and proudly declares: *If you are a member of this tribe*, then you are served; and, you will serve others.

That's how we take care of one another. *Not because you are family or because you are a friend*, but because you belong to me and I belong to you. It means showing up for someone even when you're exhausted. Even when you're not sure you like them. Even when you wonder, *what will that person ever do for me?*

Can I tell you something fantastic about families? There is someone in every family, who is known for treating each person they meet with immediate affection, genuine curiosity, and

deep concern: doormen, grocery packers, fellow shoppers... *Do you recognize this person in your own family?* And while it may take an hour to get Grandma Sara or Uncle Lou out of the store, every family member beams with pride that their loved one sees a connection with strangers and gives of themselves even when it is clearly not required. That's a life worthy of memory, honor and emulation.

This is the life we are trying to build right now, with all of you.

Jews have done this for thousands of years: We've used counter-cultural and counterintuitive practices like *hiyyuv*, *mitzvot* (commandments) and *brit* (covenant) to build a language of obligation and service that supersedes biology and best friends. A set of practices that turns strangers into family.

Interestingly, the oldest way to build Jewish community was actually a shared building project. God commanded our ancestors to construct a Tabernacle in the wilderness, a pop-up sanctuary, and everyone got on board.

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Picture it. We receive the Torah at Mt. Sinai. It's terrifying. It's awesome. God moves past the Top Ten Commandments and delves into the laws of how to treat one another, how to create a civil society, how to live holy lives through Shabbat and festivals, and then, God pauses...and God pivots.

"You know what," says God, "Let's start with something simpler. Build me a Tabernacle – a sanctuary - so I can dwell amongst you." God gives the blueprint, but asks the Israelites to provide the materials: gold, silver and bronze; blue, purple and scarlet yarn... **"Tell the Israelite people, if their heart is so moved, to bring Me gifts..."** (Exodus 25:1-2)

Let's break this down in terms of *hiyyuv*: "Tell them to bring Me gifts" - that is a command. But, God adds to the command by allowing for *individual choice*: "if their heart is so moved." In other words: Do it...but only if you really want to. I feel like that's a risk most gods wouldn't take, but, our God did. And, you know what? Everyone chooses to bring. When spoken to with a language of choice AND obligation, the Israelites bring and bring and bring some more.

Nowhere does the Torah quote an Israelite saying, "I'm just not feeling it," or, "Sorry, we have so much planned for the weekend, I don't know if we'll have time to swing by." In fact, the Torah tells us, Moses got too much stuff - too many gifts - and had to turn people away.

Perhaps it's an aspirational Torah story - best seen as a fable or fairytale. The first and last building project that every Jew agreed to. Or, perhaps there was something in place with this ancient community - something WE can aspire to - some hidden bond of connection and obligation that made it possible for everyone to say YES in a way that felt *true to them* and that was also in service to the broader community.

That's what we're trying to do today.

Like our ancestors, we are trying to build something holy using the language of obligation AND choice.

Like our ancestors: We need to recapture the language of the heart, the *kavannah* (the intention), that makes every gift special and desired, but which frames that individuality within a story of uniform, binding obligation on everyone.

Like our ancestors, we need to build something that is different from the secular world - to put forward a different set of rules and expectations - to listen for and to recognize a compelling voice from the past that calls to us and demands our presence and inspires us to action, so that we move from protecting our own to protecting something bigger than ourselves.

The Tabernacle is our template: In order to build something holy, we all need to participate.

Of course, the danger is that by reminding you that you have these obligations, you'll run away. Don't run away. We are looking for the gifts you have to give. People don't know how to step up. They feel unprepared, inadequate... I'm telling you: *What you have to offer is more than enough. But, you have to give it.* Let us show you how.

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This is OUR building project for 5780: We need to build a Jewish home at the intersection of obligation and choice. We need to decide on a set of normative practices, and tomorrow night, we need to agree that we're going to follow through on what we said we wanted. So, when I ask "who wants change" you don't walk away. You raise your hand.

Pirke Avot tells us: "The world stands on three things: *Torah, Avodah* and *G'milut Hasadim*." (Avot 1:2) Torah. Worship. And acts of loving kindness. What if we made this our foundation for action in 5780?

Come and study Torah. Look, I'm interested in your personal learning and would love for you to engage with Torah and tradition for your own sake. But that's not what I'm asking. I'm asking you to show up because your presence and perspective at the Torah table helps SOMEONE ELSE discover something profound and possibly transformative about THEIR life. You matter to someone else's learning.

- **Come to Torah study on Saturday mornings.**
- **Join an Isaiah book group.**
- **Say yes to one of the incredible learning opportunities this year.** There's an entire calendar/planner waiting for you to pick up in the lobby.

Show up for Avodah. We think prayer is about OUR relationship to God - what if it's about supporting *others* as they wrestle with their relationship to God?

There is an old joke about an atheist who goes to shul every Shabbos and sits next to his friend Ginsburg. One day, someone asks the atheist why he keeps coming to services if he doesn't believe in God. He replies, "Ginsburg goes to shul to talk to God. I go to shul *to talk to Ginsburg.*" The joke is funny because it's true. Most of us come to Temple to talk to the person next to us.

As much as I care about your personal relationship with God, this year, I'm asking you to consider how YOUR presence will help SOMEONE ELSE stand up and feel supported because you were there next to them.

- **This year, come for Shabbat.** It's every Friday. Mark your calendars.
- **Show up for a *shiva minyan*.** When you receive Isaiah's condolence announcement, write down the address and go.
- **Sign up for a meal train.** Parents with newborns. Injuries that limit us. Families in mourning. A home-cooked meal is another way of showing up. When you get the Isaiah email, reserve a slot, and start looking at recipes.

Get involved in *G'milut Hasadim*. It's probably safe to say that we are "all in" on the message of Be a Mensch. It's the tagline of our preschool. It's the promise of our religious school. It's what we want for our children...but ADULTS also need practice being mensches. We live in an increasingly toxic environment where public shaming is a national pastime. **This synagogue and this sanctuary must be spaces where we learn to live differently.**

To be a mensch - to be a good person, a kind person, an embracing person - means to practice giving without expectation. Doing something for nothing except for the opportunity to give. The secular world might not recognize its value, or, they'll call you a sucker, but in a synagogue, it's the *foundation stone* of sacred community.

- **This year, talk to someone in the lobby you don't know.** Be brave. Say hello. And if someone new says hello to YOU, for God's sake, please put down your phone and say hello back. 😊
- **Pay attention** to the family that just had a baby...that just went through surgery...that just downsized from the family home to a condo. These are powerful moments of transition that seldom show their complexity on social media.
- **Sign up for our #beingisaian Shabbat** - We are asking people to open their homes on November 1st. Host a meal or sign up to be hosted. Sit at a table with strangers knowing the only thing you have in common is Temple Isaiah. Who wants to come? I want to see a show of hands.

This year, we're building a Tabernacle through actions like these - each one, an opportunity to form a real connection and enduring support. This year we are choosing to build a life in service to others.

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The story of the two-headed man could have resolved itself by saying, "and then King Solomon *tickled* one of them and the other laughed." That's NOT the story. The story was about pain and, in truth, that is what we are most afraid of - that there will come a moment in our lives when we are suffering, and we need to know that someone else feels it and can be with us as we make our way through it.

That's what we have to learn to build and give to others, and then, God willing, we will receive.

I know we want Judaism to be easy. I'm sorry to say, it's not. But I can tell you this: It's worth the work. And it's especially worth doing the work with these people here.

This year, *if your heart is so moved*, bring your gifts, and let us build this community together.

G'mar Hatima Tova.