

KOL NIDRE SERMON _ DARA FRIMMER

RAISE UP YOUR STAFF

On the edge of the Red Sea, with the Egyptians hot in pursuit, the Israelites panic, and Moses has no answer. He drops to his knees and prays to God hoping the Holy One might send a miracle.

At that moment, according to some very subversive, ancient rabbis, God yells back: "Stop praying! Go do something. Raise up your (damn) staff."

Okay, maybe God didn't swear, but I do think God was frustrated.

Moses did what we often do when we are panicked - he worried, he dissected, he obsessed, he did everything but move into action.

And if anyone can appreciate that mindset right now, it's us.

The Israelites only had one enemy to contend with. Right now we are experiencing a moment of racial reckoning, while we confront climate change, a crumbling health care system, the weakening of our democracy, increased polarization, oh, and a pandemic...

We've never had this many cataclysmic, destabilizing, seemingly unsolvable crises converge at one time in history.

The good news is we can name them all.

The bad news is...we don't know how to fix them.

And we can recite the list over and over again but it doesn't move the needle. If all we turn to is words and more words, we're going to get run over by 10,000 Egyptian soldiers.

That's why we need to talk about action.

~~~~~

Before there was "See Something, Say Something," there was the book of Deuteronomy.

This is Moses' last shot to teach the Children of Israel how to build a just society in the Promised Land. In addition to all the obvious commandments about caring for the widow, orphan and stranger, there are also rules about returning lost property.

Who would have thought we might learn one of our most important practices from taking home a lost donkey...?

Here's what Moses says: If you see your neighbor's ox or ass wandering in the street...you are commanded by God to rescue it and return it. **Lo tuchal l'hitaleim.** (Deut. 22:3) Literally translated: You are not allowed to remain indifferent.

In subsequent generations, the rabbis are less interested in the donkey and more interested in our indifference or ambivalence to the suffering around us.

When life is out of order - the donkey is out of its pen, the ox can't plow the field - the family system is disrupted. *These are not pets.* These are economic engines that ensure the family's survival. Therefore, when YOU see that donkey, YOU have a responsibility to return it.

And this law doesn't just apply to livestock.

Someone is in pain. You help them. Someone needs food. You feed them. You see it. You address it. With your hands. Of course there are physicians, and law enforcement, and judges...of course there are people whose job it is to do this work professionally...**but Jewish tradition is clear, every person has the ability to act and transform the world.**

I know 5780 has been a hard year and you're already taking care of a lot of people...but you don't get a pass.

You see injustice, pain, fear. You have to respond.

This is not a choice. This is a commandment.

And, that's a brilliant innovation.

Because it's so intensely tempting to look away. To shut down. To ignore or deflect. To cling onto the hope that things aren't what they seem...That the answers will be simple and the response will be easy.

Or that one day we'll all wake up and the pain will be gone.

But, nothing about building a just and compassionate world was ever going to be easy which is why the Torah was likely written, recorded, and repeated over and over again.

Stop doubting if the call for help was really meant for you.

It's time to get up and act.

Raise your staff.

~~~~~

Though the commandment is clear and simple and beautiful in its 3 Hebrew words - **Lo tuchal l'hitalel** - the rabbis anticipate that it may not be enough to compel us.

The Talmud teaches, "If you see wrongdoing by a member of your household and you **do not protest** – YOU are held accountable."

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, a 12th century commentator, says the one who witnesses an atrocity and **does nothing** bears the same guilt as the one who committed the atrocity.

Inaction has dire consequences.

In her book *Me and White Supremacy*, Layla Saad writes, "**white silence** is violence. It actively protects the system. It says I am okay with the way things are because they do not negatively affect me and because I enjoy the benefits I receive with white privilege."

You witness Racism. Sexism. Homophobia. Bigotry...and you say nothing (likely because your life is not impacted by the hatred or violence against the Other), then you are contributing to the pain and suffering of the Other.

Not indirectly. Directly.

But, what if we get to the scene after the fact? After the violence? What then?

~~~~~

Last year, I told you the story of the two-headed man. This year, I have another one for you. This one takes place in Parashat Shoftim, and tells the story of a group of men who discover a dead body in an open field. No one knows who killed him. No one claims him as kin. No one owns the land. What to do? What to do?

And, two choices emerge: leave him or claim him.

Of course, we claim him.

Next, the Israelite Discovery Team literally measures the distance between the body and the nearest towns, and **the town which is closest to the site of violence and desecration is responsible....moreover...the leadership must make atonement with sacrifice and ritual declarations of innocence. (Go SLOW!)**

**For the Torah, Proximity = Responsibility.**

You saw it, even after the fact, you must respond.

Now, generations later, the rabbis of the Mishnah ask: Why? Why should this town feel so much responsibility for a stranger that they would make atonement even though they did not kill him?

Listen again to the words of our ancestors: A stranger was found dead in proximity to our communities. How was it possible he died **in our midst**, but we did not see? Did he come into our community asking for sustenance or protection...and we turned him away? While he lived, did we **choose** not to respond to him or his desperation?

This is beyond “you see it, you must respond.”

This is AFTER THE FACT.

We know you didn’t see it. YOU didn’t do it.

**But tradition sees the obscenity of an unnamed, unknown, unclaimed body, lying in a field...while we are teaching the commandments to protect the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in our houses of worship and in our children’s schools...and wonders DO we see OUR moral failure?!**

So, we are forced to measure the distance between the embodiment of our failure and our sheltered, idealistic, aspiring community...and we are asked to make a bold declaration:

(Pound heart) We ARE responsible for this atrocity.

*Ashamnu. Bagadnu. Gazalnu* — **\*\*WE\*\*** have done this.

Okay...**\*\*I\*\*** may not have done each one of them...**but I might have contributed to a society or a family or a business that allowed for that to happen.**

*Dibarnu Dofi. He’evinu. V’hirshanu.*

The practice of “shared contribution” is a deliberate, thoughtful, courageous action to **accept responsibility**.

It transforms how we see the invisible lines of connection that bind us together.

*Zadnu. Hamasnu. Tafalnu Sheker.*

And that **decision** to accept shared contribution...sets us up for the possibility of rebuilding a more just and compassionate world.

~~~~~

I know we love heroes — even that story of Moses and his staff is a bit heroic - and we like to think the heroes are coming to save us. But the Rabbis critiqued the Torah and its love of Abraham and Moses, and did something delightfully subversive. They said WE are the heroes and WE will save one another.

Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bezeh, “All of Israel is responsible for each other.” (Tanchuma, Nitzavim 2:1) Don’t get me wrong, God is in the mix, we may even imagine ourselves as partners with the Holy One, but this society...our democracy...our obligation to look out for every single American...This is on us.

And I’m right there with you.

~~~~~

Michael and I received our stimulus check from the government back in April and immediately got into a fight...I mean, a thoughtful conversation...about how to spend it. Of course, we should donate it - but to where? Racial Justice? Food insecurity? Would the twins help to choose?

And, then, some moment of pandemic parenting or urgent work interrupted, and the conversation was sidelined.

We wrote a list for the fridge: Clean house. Order groceries. *Tzedakah conversation*.

Nothing happened. The list got moved. Then it got lost.

**We saw our neighbors’ desperation. We knew we had to respond...but we didn’t.**

Now, we’re 6 months delayed from when we set our intention. The nation is still crying out...but, it’s not too late.

What is Yom Kippur if not a wake up call to finish the work and make good on the vows we promised to fulfill?

~~~~~

Judaism, in its brilliance, designed a system in which there was always an optimal way to act...and, a second best option, also good, that most of us would need because we can't be *Tzadikkim* all of the time.

Best case scenario - We see it. We respond, right then and there. We act to alleviate pain and suffering. For those of you who can do this - keep going. You are a biblical first-responder.

And, if you're like me, that second-best option comes in handy so we don't write ourselves out of the story: We show up **after the fact**, we wake up to the loss, the pain, the brutality of the body in the field, and on that day, we measure the distance and we take responsibility.

~~~~~

**A man dies naked in the street with a hood over his head. A woman is shot in her own bed. A child is taken from his parents and put in a cage.** (Remember when THAT consumed us... and so much more has happened since then)

The writer Arundhati Roy says: "The trouble is that once you see it, you can't unsee it. And once you've seen it, keeping quiet, saying nothing, becomes as political an act as speaking out. There's no innocence. Either way, you're accountable."

This is OUR nation. These are OUR bodies.

**And like our ancestors in the open field, we need a ritual that gives us space to declare our truth and name our heartbreak, and THEN, to take responsibility and act.**

The first step is we recognize our role:

How have we participated in or contributed to a system that supports hate and violence?

That preys on the weak?

That allows wealth and whiteness to dominate?

The next step is we make a plan.

On the High Holy Days, we chant the Unataneh Tokef.

We accept how much is out of our control.

And, then, just as we're about to finish, those same subversive rabbis pop up again, and we learn that there are 3 actions that can change the Divine decree from death to life, from destruction to redemption...

3 ritual acts will save us, empower us, and transform us.

**We make teshuvah** and we remind ourselves that our mistakes are not permanent or pervasive. We can grow and change - as can our city, state and nation.

**We offer tefillah:** The Hebrew word to pray - lihitpallel - means to look within. We're going to spend the next 24 hours praying together. And when three stars appear in the sky tomorrow night, we need to be ready to move our prayer into action.

**And finally, we give tzedakah:** Join me, and Michael, and the twins...and donate to organizations or individuals that are powerful in their mission to build a more just and compassionate world. Your money matters. And, if we can be honest, make it hurt.

~~~~~

In every generation, in moments of trauma and unrest, the rabbis knew we would feel the weight on our shoulders and doubt our strength.

We would question our capacity to help ourselves, let alone others...and hold back from engaging for fear we would deplete our resources.

They knew we would turn inwards and wait for someone else to fix the problem. So, they turned the obligation to act over to each of us.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg was fond of quoting Justice Brandeis, both of blessed memory, who said "The greatest menace to freedom is an inert people." In other words, a people that does not move. That does not react. That remains indifferent to the cries of pain. That does not respond.

~~~~~

Hear me tonight -

**I am your rabbi, your teacher, the one whom you've asked: What do we do next? And I'm telling you: Pick up your staff. The world is waiting for you.**

I am your mother who knows you have more strength within than you can possibly see. Stand up. Your people need you.

I am your daughter, your granddaughter, and I believe in you. I see the work you have done. I know you're not finished.

I am the widow, the orphan, the stranger, the one who was not claimed...It's not too late.

We keep telling our story as if it started 6 months ago in lockdown.

But you are part of a story that is five thousand, seven hundred and eighty-one years old. A story that started with action, with the power to change.

Put yourself in THAT story.

Raise up your staff.

Shana Tova.