

What Are We Called To Do
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5784/2023
Rabbi Susan Abramson
Temple Shalom Emeth

When I began writing this sermon a few weeks ago, it was not going well. Every day I would wake up and write and write and write and feel like I wasn't getting anywhere. One night last week it got so bad that I actually had anxiety attacks all night long. Around 4am, after tossing and turning for hours, I was so depressed that I forced myself to agree to stop thinking about sermon writing when I woke up to try to clear my head. But of course that didn't work. When I woke up, I still had that same miserable, anxious feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Suddenly I got a text message from Sandra Giroux, the volunteer coordinator for the now 24 migrant families from Haiti living in a Billerica hotel. She said she had an immediate need for school supplies for 7 new school aged children whose families had just been placed there. She sent a long list of items for each student, pens, notebooks, folders, backpacks, water bottles and on and on.

I immediately jumped into action, networking with people I knew who would help. Suddenly the thought of going shopping for school supplies seemed like the most exciting thing I could do. Within minutes, I found someone who was willing to donate all the backpacks. A local minister said that two of her parishioners would take care of a bunch of the items.

In the midst of all these phone calls, I realized that my mood had totally transformed. Despair was replaced by happiness. I felt like a cloud was lifted from my head and I was basking in the light. Instead of spending the day beating myself up and wracking my brain to figure out sermon topics, I was in my happy place. And then, just like that, I realized what I needed to talk to you about today.

Writing sermons can be an intellectual exercise in which we seek to find new interpretations of the Torah or insights into a prayer or a text which is relevant to the occasion, to relate our traditions to relevant, modern day situations. The late

chief rabbi Jonathan Sacks said, “In study, we make Torah real in the mind so that we can make it actual in the world.”

On that day I realized my most authentic sermon is not talking about Torah or the themes of the day, but actually living out its values.

All the symbols of our Rosh Hashanah celebration today point to one main theme: Being called to make the world a better place.

In today’s Torah portion God calls to Abraham and Abraham responds *hineni*, here I am.

The most important prayer of these holy days, the *Unetaneh Tokef*, centers around three concepts: teshuvah, repentance. Tefilah, prayer. Tzedakah, charity. The ultimate goal of repentance and prayer is to move us to do tzedakah, be charitable and act charitably.

But the symbol of this day which most reflects our call to action is the wordless imperative of the shofar. This is my sermon to myself, what reaches into my heart, connects me with the suffering of others and motivates me to act in the world. Some may choose to talk about Jewish principles, to analyze and interpret Torah on an intellectual level. But for me it’s all about hearing and responding to the wail of the *tekiah*, the brokenness of the *shevarim*, the urgency of the staccato notes of the *t’ruah*.

The point of all of our introspection and rituals on this holy day is to jump into action to help repair the world and ourselves. We sing an upbeat, closing song, but, no offense to Ben, for me the *tekiah gedolah*, the final long shofar blast at the end, is the imperative parting shot. Don’t forget. Don’t leave this place feeling like you have fulfilled an obligation. Act now.

Ever since I was first informed about the Haitian immigrants moving into our local towns, I literally felt called to organize a response. For me it is the suffering of a refugee, the desperation, the uncertainty, the helplessness, the struggle, the bravery, the risk they took to leave a deadly or impoverished situation, to come to an

unknown place in the hope to find of creating a better life for themselves and their children, which reaches into my heart like the wailing, broken, urgent notes of a shofar.

Some may question whether this is a “Jewish” issue, and wonder whether this is worth so much of my time and effort. To those people I would say, read the Torah. From the beginning of our people’s journey from Egypt, we were strangers in foreign lands, wandering from place to place to find a safe haven from our enemies and escape starvation. Even before that, Abraham welcomed strangers into his tent and cared for them without question. The Torah’s most important commandment is love your neighbor as yourself.

From that time to this, our people have been in this same situation. Many of us have relatives who fled from the Holocaust and those who didn’t leave suffered a worse fate. Those who have been around for many years recall how we resettled three families who were oppressed under the former Soviet Union who came here with nothing but a suitcase.

I’m so proud of everyone in our congregation who has heard this same call. I had to literally turn people away when I asked for volunteers to help with our initial clothing drive. Many others have sent in generous donations.

I hope those of you who feel this call will join me in this work. Just two days ago I learned that they need us to help with a second clothing drive for fall and winter clothes and boots for adults. Feel free to bring donations to Yom Kippur services and let me know if you are willing to help sort.

One of the passages in the Torah which speaks to me most is Ex. 35.20-21. Everyone whose heart so moved him brought an offering to the tent of meeting. Our congregation is so fortunate that so many of our members have heard the call of their heart to keep our community not only surviving, but thriving.

Our entire synagogue runs on volunteers. People’s generosity of time and money always amazes me. The chairs you are sitting on right now were all donated by someone because I happened to complain that the previous chairs were ripped and

tarnished while he was in the room. The front of the building, our remodeled social hall and kitchen, the patio outside were all renovated and created because one or two people felt that our building should be more reflective of the spirit of our community.

It is shocking to me how many hours our religious school, religious and ritual committee and house people put into the administration and running of our main programs. You would not believe all the logistics, emails and meetings just to coordinate our kids activity program today.

And those wonderful people are the tip of the iceberg. The only reason our community can provide the level and quality of programming that we have, from social justice initiatives to our “Free as a Bird” group to our Chicken Soup Brigade to our ping pong club to membership to fundraising to the tremendous job of maintaining our building to keeping our financial house in order, is because so many of you have heard the call and been moved by your hearts to make our congregation a wonderful, vibrant, solvent community which lives out our Jewish traditions and values.

The night I couldn't sleep because of my sermons was not an isolated incident. Since Covid in particular, I've been more aware of the brokenness of my own soul. I don't know of anyone who has not been emotionally, if not also physiologically impacted by the way our lives changed during the pandemic. We have been isolated from each other in unhealthy ways. We have found ways to continue to function, through Zoom, masks, social distancing. But they have all taken a toll.

We are social creatures. Whether we live alone, or with others with who we need to continually navigate a relationship, it has profoundly affected our wellbeing. Even the NY Times just published a feature article on the devastating ways in which loneliness and isolation impact the quality of our lives and our physical wellbeing. Now that Covid is on the rise once again and we need to mask and separate ourselves once more, we can hear the wail of the *tekiah*, the brokenness of the shevarim, the urgent need of the *teruah* even louder within our souls.

What can we do to soften the cry within us? To heal the broken spaces between the notes? To slow down the imperative staccato notes of urgency?

The answer, once again, is community. Our community itself has tremendous healing powers. Every time I am with others, I leave feeling physically better, my spirit restored and uplifted. Being present here, for services, for gatherings, for programs, can help heal the loneliness and isolation.

The other day I was having a conversation with Heidi Porter, the head of health and human services in Bedford. I asked her if there were current needs we could help fulfill for the now 78 families now in Bedford. She said she wanted to do another clothing drive. But she didn't want to bother us or make us have to bring clothes over or help sort them. I explained to her that this type of mitzvah brings a special sort of joy and fulfillment to many of us. Doing a mitzvah helps heal the soul and replenish our spirit.

One of the original purposes of the shofar blast was to call people together, for holidays such as this, but also if there was a threat. For me and for others, the threat can be as internal as it is external. And the antidote can be in the coming together itself. For our mental health as well as our physical well being, we need to consciously find ways of being in the physical presence of friends and community.

On this day of T'ruah, my message is that we have the incredible power to help heal others, make our Jewish community thrive and heal ourselves if we open ourselves to the wails and the cries of the shofar and consider what moves us to act in this new year.

The shofar calls each of us to action in our own unique and authentic way. We each have our own calling. I look at the faces of Haitian immigrants. I look around at our beautiful temple community. I feel the healing power of being in your presence and realize that we have not only the opportunity, but the imperative to be the message.