

Out of Nineveh
Yom Kippur Morning 5776
September 23, 2015

A funny thing happened on my way to Yom Kippur... I have been planning, for many months, to use this occasion to speak with you about an upcoming experiment, a spiritual initiative which I believe is important, different, and has the potential to change our lives. I was going to speak with you this morning about our **Early Erev Shabbat Service Experiment**, slated for one service at the end of October, and six others during the months of December and January, during which we would hold Friday evening services beginning at 6:30 PM, and help promote people breaking bread and sharing Shabbat dinner together afterwards. I was going to stand before you this morning, to plead with you for an open mind, to try something new, to allow “in” to your lives and your schedule a kind of Reform Judaism that not only accepts us as we are, but also, occasionally, actually challenges us to change. I was going to do all that, now, but, instead, well, I’m *not* going to tell you about our upcoming Early Erev Shabbat Experiment, which you will hear more about in other forums. You didn’t hear it here! I didn’t even mention it!

There are those rare rabbis in the world – or so I’ve heard -- whose High Holy Day sermons are written and ready, in July, in June... sometimes even in the merry, merry month of May. I don’t know how anyone does that. A topic, sure, but fully written? In contrast to this, one colleague deliberately holds off. As I was preparing to move here, I clearly recall a conversation with him. I was exploring what I would share with a new congregation, on my first High Holy

Days with you. And my friend said the following: “Look, I wait until late to write. You know, something always comes up.” That conversation took place in early August... of 2001.

My friends, this year, what came up, well, in some ways it is the world, knocking on our door again. In another way, it is the Haftarah portions for Yom Kippur. Both Isaiah, in the morning, and Jonah, coming later this afternoon. They shook me, they shout at me, and I share that with you now.

It is true that, just a few moments ago, we heard a call **וְקִרְאתָ לַשַּׁבָּת** **עֲנֵג לְקְדוֹשׁ יְהוָה מְכַבֵּד**, to call Shabbat a delight, and honor the holy day of Adonai.” Yes, Shabbat is important. It is worth our time, it can shape who we are, it deserves to be made, frankly, more of a priority in our lives. But that issue, that delight, comes only after something else, a foundation which was, and is, clearly...even more important... and without which the ritual, the holy day is, simply, empty of meaning and content and power and purpose:

**הֲלוֹא זֶה צוֹם אֲבֹתֵינוּ פִּתְחֵי חַרְצָבוֹת רָשָׁע הֵיטֵר אֲגָדוֹת מוֹטָה וְשִׁלְחַ
רְצוּצִים חֲפְשִׁים וְכִלְמוֹטָה תִּנְתְּקוּ: ז הֲלוֹא פָּרַס לָרָעִב לַחֲמֶךָ וְעֲנִיִּים
מְרוּדִים תָּבִיא בַּיִת כִּי־תִרְאֶה עָרִם וְכִסִּיתוּ וּמְבֹשָׁרָךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם:**

Is not *this* the fast I desire: to break the bonds of injustice, and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free, and release all those enslaved. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the homeless into your home?

These words remind us, as one writer said, not of the “abrogation of ritual, but the primacy of morality.” We could start services at 4 PM, or 8 PM or midnight and have a full house every Shabbat and none of it would matter. Unless we do our moral work in the world during the week, the wine turns sour, the challah is stale, the candles cast no light.

Do you remember, when you were young, and you did not finish your food? How old you are can be clearly marked... by what catastrophe your parents called to your attention. “Finish your food; there are children starving in...” Now, though, if we feel on shaky ground, or worry about something ultimately trivial, the comparison is obvious. It offers instant perspective. At least... hey, at least you’re not a Syrian refugee!

Many of us, of course, have had our eyes and our minds and our hearts on Syria for a long time now. I spoke, during the High Holy Days two years ago, about chemical weapons, and the loss of our self-proclaimed “red line.” And I have wondered, many times, why there are riots in Europe, and protestors banging on cars on Connecticut Avenue near Van Ness, for every tragic loss in Gaza... while there is deafening silence about atrocities literally thousands of times worse, visible to anyone who moves their eyes... just a little to the north. Where... where have we been? Why haven’t we noticed, before now?

But, as Malcolm Gladwell taught us, there comes, at times, a tipping point. Sometimes it is... a single image, so gut-wrenching, so awful we simply

cannot get out of our mind and our heart. Not fair, of course, to all those who drowned in stormy seas, were lost in silence, whose suffering was not captured on camera, or whose fate we chose not to see. But it is a focal point, crystallizing years of other catastrophic images. Or, maybe, what finally calls us to attention is the swell of numbers, a tidal force of misery so immense it can be put aside no longer.

For some, the images bring back memories. I sat in a rehabilitation facility with a congregant last week, and realized I was the only one in the room born in the United States. Caregivers from Asia and Africa, the couple from Central Europe, and for all of them flashbacks to closed gates and barbed wire, armed soldiers and uncertain futures.

And this is, indeed, the largest refugee crisis since the end of World War Two. The scope is staggering: HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, states that there are 60 million people in the world displaced by conflict or persecution. This figure includes eleven million Syrians who have left their homes because of war, either remaining inside the country or fleeing it. Eleven million! If my research is right, there were only 23 million Syrians living there in the first place. We are talking about almost half of the country here! Not to mention that we cannot even count – we know it is over a quarter million, but have no clue by how much, we simply have no idea how many have already died.

Lo tuchal l'hitalem! Our tradition demands: in the face of suffering, we must not, indeed, a Jew *can not* remain indifferent. I spoke last night about 36 questions, which uncover the core, the essence of who you are. Well, 36 times the Torah commands compassion to the stranger, “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

But what, then, can we do? Israel was struggling with how to handle waves of asylum seekers from Africa, even before the opposition leader declared that Jewish values require a Jewish state to take in at least some of those seeking an exit from Syria. Those resisting his call cite security and demographic concerns alike. And we hear, indeed, the same sentiment echoed here. What can be done, and how can we do it?

My friends, Linda Gurevich, the president of our congregation, spoke in her remarks about “audacious hospitality.” I think it is time to engage in some... truly audacious acts of welcome and support. The first step involves advocacy and education. If we are successful, the next step would involve hospitality, and sponsorship.

Fact-finding, research, education... and advocacy. This is a developing crisis. Our country’s rules, and responses, are quite different from what is going on across the Atlantic. And in Canada, congregations and community groups can sponsor an individual refugee family. We are... not there yet. Through forums and sharing of information, we really need to learn more about these rules, and watch for what changes over time. The websites of

our Reform movement's Religious Action Center, and HIAS, are good places to start, to learn about the background and relevant nuances of this crisis; we will find more ways to bring this level of awareness to our congregation in the days and weeks to come.

But in my conversations with officials at HIAS, they were very clear about what they want to see happen. HIAS's motto is "welcome the stranger; protect the refugee." They really believe that advocacy is the most critical role that American synagogues can play at this time.

Advocacy for what? By law, every year the President of the United States makes a decision, the Presidential Determination on Refugee Admission, setting the number of refugees to be admitted by our country. For some time, that annual number has stayed close to 70,000. President Obama recently indicated that 10,000 places would be reserved for Syrian refugees. And just two days ago Secretary of State John Kerry indicated that this number would be slowly raised, first to 85,000, and then to 100,000. HIAS and other immigration agencies believe that number remains significantly too low. They are asking that we call on the President to increase the general level to 100,000 even more quickly than planned, and, beyond that, we make room now, for an additional 100,000 of the neediest and most vulnerable of the Syrian refugees. You can contact the White House directly, or you can find, and sign, the HIAS petition through their website, hias.org. Further information about these actions and other opportunities to help can be found on a flyer in the foyer.

And in Israel, amidst fear and an astonishing level of historical amnesia, in a place where political leaders have lost touch with the values they are supposed to be nurtured by, bringing in massive numbers of Syrians may be... extra complicated... still, the Shalom Hartman Institute, the pluralistic academy where I have studied for the past number of years, is now opening a Day Care and Learning Center for children of African refugees, ages three to six. Information about this new school is on the tables as well.

Last Thursday, at a Back to School Night, I ran into a White House official who works with the Jewish community. We spoke about this issue; he indicated that he had just received a letter from Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism. I looked up the letter; while it was slightly less specific than the HIAS request, it did say that “difficulty cannot be an excuse for inaction in the face of this humanitarian crisis.”

It is with that sentiment in mind... that I turn to the next step.

Hospitality, and sponsorship. Should we succeed, should the level of refugees admitted to this country increase, what would happen next? First, it will take political will, and an active voice, to secure resources to take care of the new arrivals. And, second, HIAS and the nine other major immigration agencies it works with, including Catholic Charities, Lutheran and Quaker agencies, and the IRC, the International Refugee Committee, would work together in a way which might resemble the absorption of Soviet families

several decades ago. At that time, there would, potentially, be opportunities to, “host” or sponsor an individual family... and I would, then, ask us to do so.

I have asked three families in the congregation to help coordinate and spearhead these efforts, working with me and with our Vice President, Seth Maiman, as a Board liaison. These families are Barrie and Marilyn Ripin, Steven and Norma Fenves, and John Landesman and Linda Aldoory. The Ripins were involved, some time ago, when our congregation worked with the Silver Spring Interfaith Housing Project, and sponsored a family working its way out of poverty. The Fenves’ have been involved with many social action efforts here, and Steven tells me that the border crossing into Hungary, closed last week, is less than five miles from where he was born. And last year, John and Linda had immediate experience with all related issues, having brought into their home members of Linda’s extended family, Iraqi refugees who, though related by blood, were nevertheless almost complete strangers, as they had never met and had hardly any contact with each other before then.

This effort is – as anyone who has interfaced individually with families in comparable situations before knows – this is not easy work. Coming out of poverty or coming from a war zone, there is adjustment, shock, culture clashes, and very likely PTSD as well.

And we could ask, of course, why us? Why a synagogue? Why a Jewish community? These are not our people; more than that, frankly, they are our enemies. Even those Syrians treated in Israeli hospitals – and there have been many, wounded and brought into Israel in semi-secrecy, lives saved... I'll never forget the mixture of confusion and wonder, venom and gratitude, uttered by one patient: "I was brought up to think you were devils. I still hate you, but I think you *might* be human beings after all." So why? Why is this *our* problem?

And here, it is the Haftarah portion from this afternoon that gives us a clear, indeed, a direct answer. Go, Jonah was told, to Nineveh, that city in Assyria, sitting on the Tigris, practically at the juncture of what is today Iraq and Syria and Turkey. Go, to the capital of our enemies, and preach to them! And Jonah runs away. *Not* because he was concerned for his image, his ego, if what he said would not come to pass, no. He ran away because he did not want to help our enemies.

God's response, the story's response, our traditions response *could not be more clear*: You do not flee from the task of helping the most vulnerable. Such a mission, such a calling you run towards. *Lo tuchal l'hitalem*. You must not, a Jew *can not* remain indifferent.

In the book of Proverbs, we read: צְדָקָה תַּצִּיל מִמָּוֶת; *tzedakah* – righteous giving – saves from death." A story, remembered vaguely, heard at a service long ago:

Once there was a Jewish family, with parents and children, and the mother was very sick. During the week, the father would do what he could, but every week, however weak, the mother would somehow manage to set a beautiful table for Shabbat. She would set an extra place setting. And every week, the father would find someone, would bring someone home, someone hungry, someone in need. As this stranger sat at the table, the father would utter this quote from the book of Proverbs. *Tzedakah tatzil mimavet*. Righteous giving saves from death.”

The mother – [this is a disturbing story, by the way, not a happy one, and this part is hard to tell] -- the mother grew more ill, and passed away. The next Shabbat, the father took care of the Shabbat meal. As usual, there was an extra place, and there was a stranger who was going to come, to be with them. But before anything else could happen, as they were setting the table, the oldest child started screaming. “You promised! You said it! *Tzedakah tatzil mimavet!* Righteous giving saves from death! You lied!”

The father looked at his son, and shook his head. “Not hers,” he said with an unfamiliar intensity. And he pointed at the extra place setting. “His!!”

My friends, I don't know what this work will do to us, or for us. All I know, if we can make it happen, is what it will do... for whomever we can help. If we are able to bring more people, to provide shade, to give shelter or even, if we are given the chance... a drop in a bucket of an ocean of tears -- to work with one family. I know what it will do... for them.

I wanted to speak with you today about Shabbat, and how, if we let it, if we are willing to be challenged, if we rearrange things just a little bit, it can change our life. But before we rest, we have work to do. There *are* lives to change. And they aren't ours. *L'shanah Tovah*.