

I don't know if you saw this in the news, but recently at the Russian military academy, one of that nation's top generals gave a lecture on "Potential Problems and Military Strategy." At the end of the lecture he asked if there were any questions. An officer stood up and asked, "Will there be a third world war? Will Russia take part in it?" The general answered both questions in the affirmative.

The officer asked: "Who will be the enemy?" The general replied, "All indications point to China."

Apparently the audience was shocked. The same officer who asked the first question then said, "General, we are only 150 million, there are nearly ten times as many Chinese. What hope is there for success?"

The general answered, "Well, think about this. In modern warfare, it is not the quantity that matters but the quality. For example in the Middle East there were wars where 5 million Jews fought against 50 million Arabs, and Israel was victorious."

After a small pause the officer asked, 'Do we have enough Jews?'

Fighting against the odds, and living with a sense of courage and hope, even in difficult times, is a familiar refrain of Jewish history. It is also a theme at the heart of Yom Kippur. This is a time when we are reminded of the choice that lies before us - the very one Moses spoke of his generation. "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life."¹ Sometimes it feels as the odds are stacked against us. There are so many troubles in the world, so many challenges. What difference can I make?

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the corrosive influence of materialism in Jewish life. I suggested that the resulting narcissism and sense of entitlement undermines our moral compass as a people. I shared my worries that our financial success threatens to lure us into thinking too highly of ourselves.

No less a concern, however, is thinking too little of ourselves. Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, also known as the *Alter Rebbe* (1745-1813) wrote a book that came to be known as the *Tanya*. Most people, he claims, do not suffer from feelings of arrogance. In fact, the main issue for most of us is the feeling that we are inadequate. Thus, he advocated a Judaism that embraced joy and affirmed the worthiness of every person. In the opening paragraphs of his book, however, he claims that a person should not think of himself or herself as righteous or wicked. The *Alter Rebbe* claims, "if a person considers himself

¹ Deuteronomy 30:19

wicked, he will be disheartened and depressed and won't be able to serve God with joy. On the other hand, if he does not become at all depressed from (the evil in the world), he could come to treat life as a joke." So, how do we deal with this paradox of thinking neither too much nor too little of ourselves?

Perhaps the answer suggested by Schneur Zalman - to consider ourselves neither worthy nor lowly - means that we should stop worrying so much about who we are and who we are supposed to be ... and start thinking of what we are supposed to be doing. At the dawn of the modern age *Alter Rebbe* understood the problem of our time, with its focus on the individual. Ours is an age in which we continually ask, "What am I?" That leads us to ask things like: What do I seek? Who do I want to be? Have I achieved all I can? How do I obtain happiness? A more Jewish question, however, is "Where am I?" - a question that forces me to seek my place in this world in relationship to others. Where have I been? Where should I be going? What should I be doing?

The *tzadik* (righteous man) of Zanz once told another *tzadik* that having grown old and not repented for all his sins ate at his heart. His colleague answered, "My friend, you are thinking only about yourself. How about forgetting about yourself and thinking of the world?" This, my friends, is the key - if we want to make a difference, to have a life of meaning, we need to stop thinking about ourselves so much and start doing more for others.

There once was a young woman who became depressed by the evil, the suffering and misery of the world. She complained to her rabbi: "Why did God ever make such a world? Why I could make a better world than this myself."

The rabbi responded: "That is exactly the reason the Holy One put you in this world - to make it better. Now hurry up and get to work!"

The prophet Isaiah, whose words we read this morning, said the same thing. The self-denial of Yom Kippur - our fasting, refraining from bathing and so on - isn't about you and your needs. You think God actually cares about what you eat or don't eat? You think it matters what you drink or not? No, says the prophet:

No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock the fetters of wickedness,
And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;

When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin ...
(To) offer your compassion to the hungry
And satisfy the famished creature.²

Isaiah challenges both the sense of selfishness that leads one to callous disregard of those in need and a sense of unworthiness that leads one to believe that he or she cannot make a difference.

That caring for the needs of others is so important is seen in the story where God appeared to Abraham. The Torah says our forefather looked up and saw three men. He ran and greeted them, saying, "My lords, if it please you, do not go past your servant."³ Most commentators say that God appeared to Abraham in the guise of the three men, thought to be angels, which is why he uses the Hebrew term Adonai, one of God's names. However, this word "Adonai" literally translated means "my lords". Thus, as some read the text, it can also mean that just at the moment when God appears to Abraham, so do the three men. To whom should he be hospitable first - God or the visitors? Abraham responds: "If it please you, do not go past your servant." In the Hebrew, the words "you" and "your" are in the second person, singular form. He seems to say: "God, please don't leave just yet. Let me attend to these gentlemen who have appeared at my tent, and then I will come back to You." The lesson is clear: attending to God when others are in need should not be an either/or situation. Instead, when one responds to the needs of others, they and God are both affirmed. By reaching out to others, therefore, we reach out to God.

You may be unconvinced by all this - or still feel that you need a personal reason to be motivated. Perhaps you are thinking, "All these ideals are nice, Rabbi, but I have a job or kids or bills. Time is short ... so what's in it for me?" If this is your motivation, I still hope to convince you that giving to others is a good thing to do.

Harvard professor of psychiatry George Vaillant has spent his career examining the lives of people who are well. Instead of looking at those who suffer some mental distress or illness, he has been interested in what keeps people well - emotionally, as well as physically. In essence, he has tried to figure out the factors that lead someone having a sense of success in life. One of the most important things he has found is that bad events seemed to be less determinative of outcome in life than the presence of good people who

² Isaiah 55:6-7, 10

³ Genesis 18:3

can offer love and support. In essence, the more we retreat from a connection to others, the less successful we feel.

In his book, *Aging Well*, Vaillant claims that maturity involves turning the dross of emotional crises, pain, and deprivation into the gold of human connection, accomplishment, and creativity. "Such mechanisms are analogous to the involuntary grace by which an oyster, coping with an irritating grain of sand, creates a pearl," he writes. Vaillant underscores the point that helping others does not always equate to a life of ease, just as God's blessing to Abraham and his descendents has not led to unalloyed good for the Jewish people. But by reaching outside of our own pain - using it as a means to more deeply identify with and help alleviate the hurt of others - we find a sense of meaning, purpose and place.

There seems to be an inherent understanding of Vaillant's findings in Judaism. The Hebrew root-form for "giving" are the three Hebrew letters נתן. What is important about that is that it is a palindrome, reading the same in either direction. The intent could not be clearer - in giving to others we give to our selves.

In an interview in March 2008 Vaillant was asked what key factor he learned from his long-term study? His response was "That the only thing that really matters in life are your relationships to other people."⁴

Is it really all that important to be with others? Can we not have a meaningful life on our own? While it is possible to be a person of faith alone, it is not possible to be a Jew alone. Our sages taught that we should not separate ourselves from others. Some 800 years ago the great medieval philosopher, the Rambam underscored this idea, saying:

One who separates himself from the ways of the community, even though he did not violate any transgressions (except for) ... going along his own path - this person has no portion in the World to Come.⁵

The Rambam is not proscribing punishment, but describing reality. Jewish identity is built through an active relationship with the world, and engagement with others.

We live in an age when technology enables to be less connected than ever before. Do you know that you no longer have to actually go to a wedding? You can be there via the Net through webcastmywedding.net or vowcast.com. Imagine - not having to spend money to travel, to be with the relatives you really don't like! It was only a matter of

⁴ "What Makes Us Happy?", Joshua Wolfshenk, *The Atlantic* (June 2009)

⁵ Mishnah, Avot 2:5; Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance

time that funeral homes got into the picture, too. FuneralOne, which supplies funeral webcasting software to mortuaries, has seen tremendous growth in recent years, as has Funeralcast.com (I kid you not). The virtual reality that the Internet provides is showing up in Jewish life, too. A growing number of synagogues are now streaming their services live. Just think ... in a few years we won't have to even worry about getting extra chairs in the sanctuary, you won't have to trouble yourself with parking or even getting a new *yuntuf* outfit?! You will be able to sprawl out on your couch at home and watch all this on your own flat panel HD television online.

Look, I'm no Luddite. I embrace new technologies. I worry, however, that rushing headlong into an online life pushes us ever further from an engagement in real life. Now, more than ever, we need to engage personally - not virtually.

You may be aware that we ask every young person who becomes a Bar or Bat Mitzvah here to be involved in a "Mitzvah Project." The goal is not that these B'nai Mitzvah do this as some kind of requirement, but that in the act of doing for others they understand that social justice is a lifelong responsibility - and gift. I would hope that our young people who go into the city to distribute clothes to those who are homeless, who grow and pick crops for the hungry, who go to Israel to help other youngsters who are abandoned by their parents, who visit the aged and put on a concert for them, will become adults who continue to care.

If we ask the young people in our congregation to do this, should we not ask the same of ourselves? We do expect a financial commitment to belong to a synagogue, but the community I dream of would say to every member: "To be a part of this community, you have to give."

The Torah - old, yet ever relevant - tells us what we need to do. The holiness of Yom Kippur, we will read this afternoon, is not related to personal piety, prayer or petition to God. It is about paying workers a fair wage, ensuring that there be no perversion of justice, leaving food for the hungry, treating immigrants with equity and creating social structures that do not endanger life. The social concerns of our age - and every age - are at the heart of what it means to turn to God. We are commanded, then, to be involved in the issues of our time - the tyranny of Islamic theocracy in Iran, the genocide in Darfur, the problem of the uninsured and under-insured in this country, the homeless and hungry who live among us.

With that in mind, I am asking you today to make a pledge. This is not an appeal to give money. I want something more valuable from you. Your time. Not just signing a petition. Not simply writing a check. Yom Kippur is the “day of atonement.” This year make it is the day of “at one-ment”, of being directly involved, one-on-one in the repair of the world. None of us can do all the things suggested on the pledge card at your seat. But all of us can do one of them.

The issues are complex. There are different points of view about how to challenge the Sudanese government, how to oppose Iranian President Ahmadinejad’s anti-Semitism, how to tackle the problem of health care and homelessness in this country. But the values are unequivocally clear. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Leave ... for the poor and the stranger.” “Do not put a stumbling block before the blind.” “Do not pervert justice.”

Can you make a difference? One day a man went down to the beach. As he walked along the shore, he saw human figure moving like a dancer. As he got closer, he saw that it was a young girl, and the young girl wasn’t dancing, but instead was reaching down to the shore, picking up starfish, and very gently throwing them into the ocean.

“Good morning! What are you doing?” asked the man.

The girl paused, looked up, and replied “Throwing starfish into the ocean. The sun is rising, and the tide is out. And if I don’t throw them in, they’ll die.”

“But, young lady, don’t you realize that there are miles of beach and thousands of starfish all along it? You can’t possibly make a difference!”

The girl, listening politely, bent down and picked up another starfish, throwing it into the sea past the breaking waves. Turning to the man, she modestly replied, “It made a difference for that one.”

Small in number though we Jews may be - we have the capacity to be great. It is a power that comes from a sense of purpose and mission. It is a strength that is based in knowing we are more powerful than we often give ourselves credit.

I told a joke at the beginning about a Russian officer worried if they had enough Jews. But we don’t have to worry. There are enough Jews. There is you. And you can make a difference. To quote the popular Israeli song by Arik Einstein and Miki Gabriellov, אריק איינשטיין וּמִיכָאֵל גַּבְרִיֶּלֹב, “you and I can change the world.”

The Holy One put you and me in this world to make it better. Now ... let’s get to work!

אני ואתה Ani v'Atah
“Change the World” Pledge Card

In the coming year I vow to get involved in acts of **תיקון עולם tikkun olam**, “repair of our world.” I will:

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Lobby U.S. government representatives to increase sanctions against Iran if they do not give up their nuclear ambitions. <input type="checkbox"/> Help with the synagogue “Solar Cooker” project, which will save lives in Darfur and protect the environment. <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer time with our congregational effort with “Family Promise”, an interfaith effort to house and feed homeless families in Nassau County in religious institutions. <input type="checkbox"/> Cook, serve or entertain Port Washington residents in need at one of our congregation’s “Community | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dinners” this year (January 9 and June 5, 2010). <input type="checkbox"/> Be an advocate for Israel, based on my understanding of the best way forward, through a lobby group like the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) or JStreet, or supporting Israel advocacy on a university campus. <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer time serving a lunch at the Interfaith Nutrition Network (INN) in Hempstead. <input type="checkbox"/> Donate blood to save a life <input type="checkbox"/> Join the Social Action Committee at The Community Synagogue to expand our efforts to “repair the world.” |
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By returning this card I agree to be contacted by a volunteer at The Community Synagogue to be involved.

Name: _____
 Best way to contact me (email, phone): _____