

A few months ago my cousin was playing hide and seek with his two young daughters, 3 and 1½ years old. Not able to find a very good hiding spot, he simply bent over - head bent low and *tush* protruding. The girls counted to ten, then came squealing with laughter into the room looking for their father. The 3 year old was completely stymied. “Where is he? Where is he?” The little one, however, was able to “think out of the box”, and immediately ran over to her upside-down dad, and kept patting him, as if to point out to her oblivious sister, “here he is. Here.” My family roared in laughter.

During these Days of Awe we play a similar game of hide and seek. We show up to services in great numbers, fulfilling some sense of duty or responsibility - to what it is sometimes hard to know - but I suspect many of us come here to hide. In this vast crowd we think it is easier to not be seen. “People won’t know me. And I, asked to confront who I really am, can pretend that I’m not here because no one knows the ‘real me’ - the mistakes I’ve made, the time I squander, the awesomeness of life I ignore.”

Nearly two hundred years ago the grandson of the Hasidic Rabbi Barukh was playing hide-and-seek. After awhile he came running to his grandfather all upset. What’s wrong? “Zayde,” the young boy cried, “I counted, but when I came looking for everyone they ran away. I was all alone.” Tears brimmed in Rabbi Barukh’s eyes and he said: “God says the same thing: ‘I hide, but no one wants to seek me.’”

All our lives we play hide-and-seek, imagining that our actions go unnoticed or that our failure to act has no consequence. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur grab us by our spiritual shoulders, however, and shake us up. The message of prayer, music, and *shofar*, of Torah and *haftara* readings is clear. Do not think that you can come and go from here, and go through life, without being seen. Stop hiding from your true self. As my little cousin knew, in the end we are here ... right here.

If you think that showing up for services today fulfils the obligation to be present as a Jew, you have misread the intent of this morning’s Torah portion. God calls Abraham and he responds with one word *הִנְנִי* “I am here.” The Hebrew word *הִנְנִי* is not a word connoting a spatial concept (“I’m here, in this spot”), but something spiritual (“I am prepared, ready, open to action”). Does Abraham need to

wave his hand and say, “here, God, over here”?! Rather, Abraham’s words are a promise of what faith truly is - an inner commitment that manifests itself in the willingness to act.

Don’t get me wrong. Showing up is nice, and I am thrilled to see you here. But showing up is not what Rosh Hashanah asks of you and me. We are to take from this day and engage ourselves in the world and in the lives of those who need us.

We Jews have known no small measure of sorrow in our history. Little wonder, then, that a typically Jewish joke is the one that speaks of people in a *shtetl* suffering from a pogrom. They want to inform others of the danger, so they go to send a telegram. Informed they only have enough money to pay for five words they decide to send this: “Start worrying. Letter to follow.”

Sometimes Jews do seem to overreact, and our communal concern with hatred, prejudice and injustice can border on the paranoid, but between us, I prefer the path of worrying about the world to one of not caring.

Perhaps the best way to know that we Jews care is by the hat we all wear. I am not referring to the *kipah* or *yarmulke*. They are certainly Jewish hats, but not the quintessential Jewish hat, not the one every child of Israel wears. To me, this (*put hard hat on*) is the Jewish hat. And what is our construction site? The world in which we live. (*Take off and place on side*)

The mystics of our people said that at the creation of the world a great shattering occurred. As a result of that cataclysm shards of God's Presence entered all of Creation. On the plus side, there are bits of the Divine all around us. The world, however, is broken and incomplete. God cannot or will not fix it, the mystics taught, which leaves us to restore the world to wholeness. *Tikkun Olam* they called it, “repairing the world.”

*Tikkun Olam* is a radical religious philosophy. It is modeled on Jacob's struggles against the world as it is and seeks a world that might be ... that ought to be. It says that as *b'nei Yisrael*, children of that wrestler father, we must be the world's disturbers of the status quo. Putting on the Jewish hard hat means “repairing the world” ... and not just the Jewish one. The political well-being and spiritual strength of Israel deserves our attention, but so does the notion of justice in all lands and for

all people. As a Jewish community we are blessed with financial wherewithal, but with that good fortune comes an attendant responsibility to speak out against policies in this land that have increased the gap between rich and poor.

Even before I arrived here I began reading The Community Synagogue's monthly bulletins. One of the most exciting programs I read about was last year's Mitzvah Day. Hundreds of people took part and made a difference. The group that sponsored that day, our Mitzvah Corps, is justifiably proud of the success of that program, but they recognize that true *mitzvah* work is ongoing. And to do that work they need you. They need you to put on your hard hat and help fix the world.

What do they need you to do? Visit congregants who are sick or cook meals for those who are homebound. If you have lived through a loss - the death of a parent, have gone through a miscarriage, lived through breast cancer, had to raise a child with autism or been in an abusive relationship - and can help others, we need your willingness to offer confidential support and advice. The Mitzvah Corps is the best means we have to be a community, of saying to others, "we are here ... and we care."

To reach beyond the walls of this *shul*, a new committee is in the midst of being formed - a *Tikkun Olam* or Social Action Group. While the exact responsibilities of this committee will be set by those who take part, the broad task is clear. This congregation - rich in history, blessed with incredible human resources - must rise up to be a voice for political change. We must inform ourselves of the needs in the Jewish world - of social ills in Israel, of the struggles of fellow Jews in other lands, of the hidden problem in our own midst of alcoholism and abuse. At the same time, a *Tikkun Olam* group must grapple with what we, as liberal Jews, have to say about health care in this land, about tax changes, about the growing gap between rich and poor, and the quagmire of military involvement in the Middle East. The *Tikkun Olam* group will not be for everyone. It is for you, however, if you are unafraid of controversy, willing to speak out and are prepared to say, ηββω "here I am", here we all are, prepared and ready to act.

When you leave today, then, take a pledge card (from one of the ushers or out on the table in the front lobby) - and commit yourself to help in at least one way. And if you are not ready to sign right away, look in next month's "mailbox". Do not put

this card on a bulletin board or stick it to your fridge and forget it. Fill it out - and make a difference.

In some ways, helping the world is the easy part of committing ourselves to life. It is much harder to say, “here I am” to family and friends who need us.

The relationship between Abraham and Isaac is a troubling one in the *Akedah*. What is unambiguous, however, is that they are together. Twice in this short passage we read that the two of them walked as one - *וְהִשְׁפָּהוּ יַחְדָּם*.

The Hebrew word *וְהִשְׁפָּהוּ* “together” is connected to the word *שִׁפְּהָ*, meaning “single” or “united.” They were joined, therefore, in singular purpose. Indeed, the traditional sources indicate that Isaac knew exactly what he was getting into. Far from being of tender age, rabbinic tradition says that Isaac was a 37 year old man. There was, then, no generation gap, no distance of understanding between father and son.

How difficult it is to live in ways that we can be so present for those close to us. Many have asked me, “is living here like being in Canada?” For all the differences, one thing is the same - people never have enough time. Even with help at home, or support of families, it is hard to juggle work and shopping, carpools and all the events we schedule for ourselves and our children. There and here, people do the same thing - fill up their lives so full that there is little time to just “be”, to make the emotional room to connect with those who should matter the most.

Activist Rabbi Avi Weiss - who spearheaded demonstrations for Soviet Jews, who regularly visits convicted spy Jonathan Pollard - tells a story about his parents, who made *aliyah* to Israel in the 1970s:

Whenever my parents flew to New York, it was my responsibility, as their only child living there, to meet them at the airport. Once, my father called to inform me that they were arriving 24 hours earlier than scheduled. Professing my deep love for my parents, I insisted that I couldn't change my schedule on such short notice.

“You became a hot-shot rabbi,” my father responded, “and you don't have time for your parents?”

“I love you deeply,” I protested, “but it's difficult to alter plans at the last moment.”

I'll never forget my father's response: “Don't love me so much - just pick me up at the airport.”

Rabbi Weiss' parents reminded him that the key issue in families is not really love, but presence. The only emotion we read about in the *Akedah*, however, is love. "Take your son," God commands our patriarch, "your only son, ,חַטְּרַט the one you love." This is, in fact, the first time the word "love" appears in the Bible. Commentators have long debated the kind of love that brings a father to do to a child what Abraham is prepared to do. What is incontrovertible, however, is that Abraham's love is one that motivates him to act with his child - to go with him. Love, then, is connected with our being present - really present - for our families.

Presence matters, both at moments of joy and during times of heartache. Isaac knew what lay ahead, say some, for Abraham told him. "God will show you the lamb to be offered, (it is you) my son." He can face the terror, however, because he is not alone. וְהִסְפִּיחַ אֶת־בְּנֵי־אֶבְרָהָם. Isaac is no different than most of us. I have met many people who have had to deal with horrific things. Those usually able to cope the best are those with loved ones close at hand.

When I first started out as a rabbi, the colleague I was with, Rabbi Mark Shapiro, took me with him to the hospital. It was a Friday and he was behind in his sermon writing for that *Shabbes*. "Always go visit people in the hospital," he advised me. "Your sermon will soon be forgotten. But if don't show at their bedside they will never forget you were not there."

You do not, of course, need to be a rabbi to have your presence matter. It is hard to make the time to go to weddings and B'nai Mitzvah, to go out in the evening to comfort mourners at a *shiva*, to show up early for a *Brit Milah* or *Brit Bat*, but people notice. And when you are not there, it has the potential to create a rift in a relationship that may be hard, if not impossible, to repair. הַבְּרִית means that to live an engaged Jewish life requires a willingness to be present to participate.

Let's be honest, our presence, even at the happy times, can be tough. Emotional undercurrents tug at our heart. What mixed feelings well up when a Bat Mitzvah sings beautifully, and thoughts wander guiltily to our child with learning disabilities who can barely read the *alef bet*. We attend a nephews wedding, and wonder, "when will my child get married?" How hard it is to join a friend at the graduation of her

granddaughter from Hebrew School, when our children do not give their grandchildren a Jewish education.

If closing ourselves off from others is easier, why, then, should we weave our lives in with those of others? Because in our presence we come to know that we belong to something bigger than ourselves, bigger than our own immediate families. It meant so much to me that a cousin of mine came up from Florida this past June to be with us when our son became Bar Mitzvah. What really moved me was how this cousin, who had not seen my mother, hovered around her - and how my mom came to life talking to her. My cousin later told me, "I remember how you went out of your way to visit my mom and dad a few years ago." I hardly remembered, but obviously my presence mattered. My mom's joyous reunion was, then, a ripple in the pond of time brought by a shared visit with this cousin's mom years ago. One never knows how our presence becomes a source of blessing.

Jewish tradition teaches that God, too, is present at key moments in our lives. When a couple comes under the *huppah*, we speak of God's Presence resting on the cover, offering shelter and *shalom*. Because Adam and Eve had no parents, one legend speaks of God as catering, cooking and serving the meal. In a touching detail, the *midrash* says God even helped as Eve's hairdresser, braiding her hair.

God also visits the sick, our rabbis teach, evidenced by the angels who come to Abraham shortly after his circumcision. God attends funerals, too, and even helps shovel the dirt. As Torah says, "God buried Moses in the valley."

God shows up. And so, too, should we. As difficult as it is, each of us is called on by God to show up, for the good and the bad. ηββω - "here I am." Not hiding behind schedules, questions of faith or settling old scores, but present.

At the end of playing hide-and-seek my friends and I used to say a nonsense sentence, "All-ey, all-ey oxen free." I have no idea where it comes from, but even as children we all knew what it meant. Everyone come home, stop hiding, let's be together. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish way of saying the same thing. *B'nai Yisrael*, fellow Jews, stop hiding. The world needs you, your synagogue needs you, your friends and family need you. "All-ey, all-ey oxen free."

