

Expanding our Circles of Obligation

Rabbi Daniel Gropper, Yom Kippur 5744

Yom Kippur 5744 - Expanding our Circles of Obligation

Gut Yontiff.

When the Temple stood in Jerusalem, it was the job of the High Priest to care for all the people of Israel. Each member of the Israelite community, old or young, male or female, rich or poor mattered to him. On Yom Kippur he confessed all of our sins to God, helped restore us to a place of ritual and spiritual wholeness and somehow, helped to realign our relationship with God for another year.

Yom Kippur was the High Priest's special day. One week prior he had left his home to take up quarters in the side chambers of the Temple. An understudy was assigned to him in case he should die or become ritually unfit. During the whole of that week, he would perform all the temple duties, such as burning the incense, lighting the lamps, and offering the daily sacrifice. In addition, he would study two Torah portions and learn them by heart to make sure he didn't make any mistakes.

On the eve of Yom Kippur, the moment we now call Kol Nidre, the High Priest would stay up all night preparing himself spiritually. If he fell asleep, young priests woke him up by reciting psalms. Sometimes they would make the High Priest stand on the cold, stone floor, just to keep him awake.

The climax of the ancient *Yom Kippur* ritual was when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies. You had to enter empty handed, all your baggage checked at the door. It was a perilous journey. A rope was tied to his feet, in case he didn't survive and had to be dragged back into this world.

It is said that when he came out and spoke God's ineffable name, the people fell on their faces. The moment was transformative. The sense of purity and renewal was so dramatic, such an ecstatic sense of relief and possibilities was unleashed.... that at some point the leaders instituted the custom of reading the sexual prohibitions on *Yom Kippur* afternoon.

The entering of the holy of holies was facilitated by three offerings for atonement. First the priest made offerings for himself and his family. Then for his fellow Levites, his tribe. Finally, the High Priest prayed for the whole household of Israel. Three circles, from those he knew best to those he felt responsible for.

We no longer have a temple, nor do we have priests; however, I do believe that we operate in similar ways to the order of the priestly prayers. Our first concern is for that of ourselves and that of our families. Just as the airlines tell us to put the oxygen mask on first before assisting others, we naturally put our own needs and those of our families before those of others. Our next circle of obligation is to **our** tribe. This may be the town we live in, the school our children attend, our club or this synagogue. We serve on school boards, town councils and PTO's, we give time to various local committees and task forces. We coach sports teams.

Knowing that synagogues are primarily relational communities, that must show care and concern for those in our midst, some of us visit the sick and homebound. Some deliver challah, go shopping, or offer rides to others to attend services. Others lead shiva minyanim when the need arises. This is how we care for our tribe.

Of course, while we all have good intentions and want to show our love and support, sometimes things happen within a tribe where a "red line" of appropriate social behavior is crossed. A person or a family might be embarrassed. Everyone in the community feels for that family yet no one takes the necessary step to confront the one who caused the offense, to give them the opportunity to do t'shuvah and to right a wrong. Don't we, who live in community, who choose to live so close to one another, have an obligation to support and even defend those who are mistreated? Don't we have an obligation to help those who have behaved badly to become aware of their behavior so that they might change their ways? Don't we have an obligation to

learn the full story before jumping to conclusions? Shouldn't we think beyond our own narcissistic needs about how our decisions or reactions might harm another? Isn't that part of the social contract? Isn't that what today is all about?

As the circles keep expanding, the next becomes our national community. Recall our response to Hurricane Sandy. Remember the national cry for sensible gun legislation after the Sandyhook murders. We widened our circle of obligation to advocate for innocent children who deserve to go to school without fear, for parents who should be able to put their children on the school bus knowing that they will come home safely that afternoon.

That struggle continues.

For others, the third circle of obligation is the Jewish people. *Kol Yisrael Aravim Zeh BaZeh* says the Talmud, all Jews are responsible for each other. We feel obligated to Jews, Reform or not. Be they in Russia, Ethiopia or Israel; next door or across the globe. Organizations like the Joint Distribution Committee and UJA/Federation were created with this mission in mind – to care for those in need; locally, in Israel and around the world.

Like ripples in a pond, our circles of obligation mirror that of the High Priest on Yom Kippur – from ourselves and our families to our local community and then to our nation, be it the Nation called America, the nation called Israel or both.

The high priest could only imagine three circles. His world was very small. News travelled slowly. Until the telegraph was invented, weather prediction did not exist. Until Gutenberg invented the printing press, information was kept in the hands of the educated and the elite. Given how our world has changed from that of the high priest, I wonder if there can be a fourth circle of obligation? If satellites can beam back a picture of the entire globe, how does it alter our sense of responsibility to people whose lives are totally different from our own?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that, traditionally our sense of involvement with the fate of others has been in inverse proportion to the distance separating us and them. What has changed is that television and the Internet have effectively abolished distance. They have brought images of suffering in far-off lands into our immediate experience. Our sense of compassion for the victims of poverty, war and famine, runs ahead of our capacity to act. Our moral sense is simultaneously activated and frustrated.

What then do we do with this feeling of being overwhelmed? Do we circle the wagons and look inward, to the circles of the High Priest, only caring for those whom we know, for those who are like us? Or do we allow that feeling of frustration to motivate us to act? And what happens when the connection is greater than that experienced through the TV and Internet? With air travel you can be around the world in a matter of hours. What is our obligation once we have met, worked with and gotten to know others who might live lives so totally foreign from our own?

As I shared on Rosh HaShanah, I had the privilege of spending 11 days in India this summer. It was a trip sponsored by American Jewish World Service. AJWS draws inspiration from the time-honored Jewish commitment to justice, working "to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world." AJWS works with partner organizations in the poorest nations on the globe, regardless of race, religion or nationality, to achieve the communities' own goals for development, empowerment, and human rights. Along with 16 other rabbis I studied Jewish teachings on the struggle for human rights and the alleviation of poverty, met with civil society leaders that AJWS supports and did intensive physical labor alongside local residents.

We were in the village of Bikhariपुरwa, a tiny rural village in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous and poorest state. Aside from the Israeli couple we met at the airport returning from the holy city of Varansi, we were likely the only Jews in a population of 200 million. That is what it means to be a minority. And here we were, in this rural village, a village that has neither electricity, running water, nor sewage facilities.

Each morning we arose to contribute our labor. Hard as this might be to imagine, this group of American rabbis laid bricks for a new play area, prepared the ground for a new drainage system to prevent flooding during monsoon rains, made and mixed cement by hand, and created new surfaces for more sanitary food preparation in the school's kitchen. These gloves, still caked with cement, are a reminder of that work.

Consistent with the collaborative philosophy of AJWS, we did not impose our judgments about what was most needed to improve the school's primitive facilities. We offered our help to support our hosts' desires for their own community, as progressive theories of development stress that those on the ground know what is needed most.

Our journey was filled with intense sights, sounds, smells and sensations. In extreme heat and humidity we saw makeshift dwellings and businesses made with sticks and brush by the side of the road. We encountered cattle sharing the streets with a cacophony of cars, bicycles, motorcycles, and tiny electric rickshaws.

We experienced young women and children begging Westerners for money. We also witnessed magnificent Hindu and Muslim houses of worship and the dramatic beauty of the richly colored saris, shawls, and head scarves of Indian women. And we met with remarkably courageous civil society leaders, working for an end to discrimination based on caste, gender, and sexual identity. These activists are challenging a prevalent definition of economic development that tolerates rampant poverty while their nation's upper classes grow ever wealthier.

But at the heart of our trip was our work with the community members. At first, they rightly looked at us with suspicion in their eyes. But they soon reacted to our evident desire to help, our genuine offers of the greeting, "Namaste," our sweat and toil at the school, and our obvious affection for their children. The villagers placed strings of marigolds around our necks and red strings around our wrists and asked us (in their few words of English) to visit their village again on our next trip.

While the learning and work were meaningful, it was the connections we made that were most impactful. Because of these relationships our circles of obligation were widened. I want to take a few moments to share one connection. Inder is 32 years old. His oldest daughter is twelve. Like the other villagers of Bikhariपुरwa he owns farm land where he harvests rice and wheat. In addition, he is the village's chief mason. He earns about 120 Rupee or \$2 a day. Is he impoverished? By absolute standards, yes. Yet by relative standards he might be less poor than we think. Inder's basic needs of food, shelter, clothing and education are met. Because of his close knit community and the support they offer, in some ways he is richer than me. But don't misunderstand me. He is still poor and some of his basic human rights are still not being met.

It was Inder's job to instruct and supervise us in the making of concrete. He quickly surmised that he was dealing with complete amateurs. Even though we lacked a common language, he patiently showed us how to mix gravel, sand, cement and water. And it seemed like we all felt a need to impress him, to show him that these rabbis with smooth uncalloused hands could do this work.

At the end of the first day he gave me a slap on the back. With a twinkle in his eye he smiled, as if to say, "good job." The next day, after completing our work, we wandered into the heart of the village. There we met, men with men and women with women to ask questions of each other. Their greatest desire? To have electricity for two basic reasons. First, so that they can see when snakes fall through their thatched roofs at night and second, so they do not have to spend 15 rupees – about 10-15% of their daily wages – to neighboring villagers to charge their cell phones. Yes, these villagers who live without electricity, who must pump their water by hand, have cell phones. This is our world. Their questions of us? What kind of food do we eat and do our parents live with us? If not, who looks after them when they get sick and old? The first question was fun to answer. How do you explain French Fries or Sushi or a Frappuccino? The second question was like a knife to the heart.

As we prepared to depart from that conversation, I offered to shake Inder's hand. He shook his head no. Puzzled, he said in Hindi, "I will shake your hand before you get on the bus." It was an important message – don't say goodbye until you are really saying goodbye. True to his word, just before I boarded the bus he shook my hand.

Our last day was emotional. We finished the work at the school and celebrated our success, asking our hosts to send pictures of our finished projects. Once more we walked into the heart of the village. As we did, all the school children walked with us. In call and response we sang, "*hinei - hinei; mah tov - mah tov; u mah; umah; na'im, na'im shevat achim, shevet achim gam yachad.*" We had a final good-bye ceremony then Inder and I walked silently back to

the bus. Once there I extended my hand to say good-bye. Again he shook his head, “no.” This time he extended his arms and hugged me in their customary style, first on this side, then the other. I burst into tears. Would I see him again? Probably not. Would I ever find him on Facebook? Unlikely. We live very different lives in very different places.

I went to India to have my heart opened to distant branches of the human family, and the people of Bikharipurwa greatly broadened my heart. These people – and their counterparts throughout the Global South – can never again be invisible, expendable, or irrelevant to my own well-being. They are no longer someone else's problem. They are now in my own circle of love and concern. I can never again forget that these people are as deserving as my own immediate neighbors of the basic rights that all people deserve.

So I wonder, now that you have heard Inder's story, do you feel responsible? Not to feel sorry for him but rather, to ensure that his basic human rights are fulfilled. Now that I've brought you into the village of Bikharipurwa, has your circle been widened?

The truth is, we all interact with other members of our global community on a daily basis. Allow me a simple demonstration (take off robe). My shirt was made in _____, my tie, _____. My pants are from _____, my belt from _____ and my shoes were made in _____. My cell phone was designed in California and assembled in China. This microphone that is broadcasting these words, in _____. We interact with the world – in many cases with the Global South multiple times a day, often without even realizing it. The question is, once we do, do we feel responsible?

Former Secretary of State Warren Christopher shares the following story: "I was driving down a two lane highway at about sixty miles an hour. A car approached from the opposite direction, at about the same speed. As we passed each other, I caught the other driver's eye for only a second. I wondered if he might be thinking, as I was, how dependent we were on each other. I was relying on him not to fall asleep, not to be distracted by a cell phone conversation, not to cross over into my lane and bring my life suddenly to an end. And though we had never spoken a word to one another, he relied on me in just the same way.

Multiplied a million times over I believe that is the way the world works. At some level, we all depend on one another. Sometimes the dependence requires us simply to refrain from doing something, like crossing over the double yellow line. And sometimes it requires us to act cooperatively, with allies or even with strangers¹.

In many ways, Secretary Christopher was bringing to life the thinking of 20th century philosopher Emanuel Levinas. Levinas² centers his entire philosophy on the human face and in particular, the eyes. Once our eyes meet those of another, we become responsible to that person. It does not matter whether or not the other will reciprocate, what matters is that we are subject, and that we are responsible. As he puts it, “the face presents itself, and demands justice.”³ So, for example, when you walk the streets of Manhattan and a homeless person catches your eye, you become responsible. When you see the face of Inder or anyone who is in need, you are obligated.

This, of course, can bear a very heavy weight. I keep thinking of a final scene in Schindler’s list. The Jews he saved have fashioned a gold ring for him. On it they inscribed the Talmudic phrase, “one who saves a life, saves the entire world.” Schindler breaks down. “How many more could I have saved?” he asks, “one, two, five, ten? How many more?” He is stricken with guilt. We can be too. But in the words of Ruth Messenger, president of AJWS, “we cannot retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed.” Doing nothing is not an option. Learning about issues of global justice and what you can do is.

If I have anything to confess this Yom Kippur it is this. Over the years I have dipped my toe in the waters of social activism but have avoided swimming in the deep end. Years ago I spoke in favor of same sex marriage, a woman’s right to choose and the affordable care act. I wrote a couple of articles on the need for sensible gun legislation but didn’t follow up. I, a Canadian with a Green Card who understands first hand the need to fix our broken immigration system have been silent. It took us years to begin reading the names of soldiers killed in service

¹ This I Believe, p. 34

² 1906-1995

³ Totality and Infinity 294

to this country. Sure, I forward email petitions asking you for your signature. A few of us attended rallies for Darfur or to oppose Ahmadinejad's hateful speeches at the U.N; together we created a green team that continues to be vibrant. We take our confirmands to the Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C and ask our b'nei mitzvah to think about how and where they give but I haven't REALLY stuck my neck out for a particular issue of human rights. I even stopped pushing to have us only serve fair trade coffee. Maybe I was afraid of upsetting people. Maybe I was concerned that it would take too much time; that it would take me away more from my family. This is my confession: I have been too silent when I could have spoken up – for those in need here and for those like Inder. Heschel's words "that few are guilty but all are responsible" ring loudly in my ears. It is a call to which I must respond; for when this is over, when I give my last sermon, I don't want people to say I was nice. I want people to say that I stood for something. Most importantly, when my kids grow up and say things like, "Abba, when there was a genocide in Darfur, when the seas were rising or when women in India and Pakistan and Afghanistan were being raped, what did you do?" I want to say that I did something.

I think the same holds true for most of us. We want to live a life that matters. We want to be known for more than just the cars we drive, the clubs we belong to or the vacations we take. We want to say that we responded to the needs around us and those around the world. The Talmud states that synagogues are to have clear windows. The windows are there for us to look outward, to notice the needs of the world and to respond. If we cannot see the outside when we pray, then we miss the point of our prayers. These stories, words and rituals are to move us to act, to agitate, to cry out for justice, to fix that which is broken. To do less is to lose sight of why God created us. So hear this confession dear God. Know I will try to do better. Reb Zusya once said to his disciples, "when I die, I am not worried that they will ask, 'why were you not like Moses, I am worried they will ask, why were you not Zusya?" I too worry that the angels will ask me, 'why were you not Daniel?'

If working alongside other rabbis taught me anything else it is this. You cannot change the world alone. There is strength in numbers, especially like-minded people.

When I was a boy, my favorite cartoon was the Super-friends. Superman, Batman and Robin, Aquaman and Wonder Woman were the Justice League of America. They worked together to fight crime. Their headquarters was the Hall of Justice. A few years ago we started our Green Team. That Yom Kippur I came off the bima and threw t-shirts into the congregation.

I won't do that this morning.

But I am calling on you to start a Jewish Justice League with me. Together we will learn about local, national and global issues of social justice. We will seek inspiration from our tradition. We will wrestle with the complicated questions of poverty and human rights in our modern era, and we will create ways for members of this congregation to act which could be anything from letter writing campaigns to spending a day lobbying in Albany or Washington. If you care about human rights, if you are willing to advocate for change, join me. Let me know that you will commit to this new project that brings us closer to our vision. Tweet me, find me on Facebook, send an email or pick up the phone. Go to AJWS' website to learn what they do. Check out Jewish World Watch which was created to mobilize congregations to advocate for social justice. As Ghandi taught, "be the change you want to see in the world."⁴

As we prepare to continue our fast on this day of introspection, I leave you with a single question. Do we remain like the High Priest of old, caring only for those who are like us, or do we see our role on this planet as something greater? I am now obligated to the Inder's of the world. They now have my attention. Do they have yours?

So what do I do now?

In the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero who was assassinated in El Salvador for speaking on behalf of the victims of that country's civil war, we plant seeds: *We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.*

⁴ Actually, what he probably said was, "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. ... We need not wait to see what others do."

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own. Amen."