

Everything is Connected, We are Responsible  
Rabbi Daniel Gropper  
Yom Kippur 5781  
Community Synagogue of Rye

Shimon bar Yochai - yes, the same rabbi I referenced on Rosh Hashana, taught the following parable: A group of individuals were traveling on a ship. Suddenly, one of them pulled out a hand drill from his satchel and began boring a hole into the hull. “What are you doing?!” exclaimed his fellow passengers. He said: “What do you care? I paid for this seat. I am just drilling underneath my area.” “But the water will rise and flood us all. We will all drown. We are all in this boat together!”<sup>1</sup> Never in our lifetimes has this parable been truer. We are all in this together.

We might have learned the lesson from the Pando, the 106-acre, 6,000,000-kilogram, clonal colony of quaking Aspen trees in South-Central Utah. Pando, which is Latin for “I spread out,” is the largest living organism on the planet. It shares one massive underground root system, which means that these trees depend on each other. You will never find a solitary Aspen.

When we come to pray on Yom Kippur, even if we sit alone in our homes, our prayers and confessions are still voiced in the plural. Still, we tend to focus inwardly: “Am I taking compassionate care of myself and others?” “Am I showing up in my relationships and my work as the person I want to be?” “Whom am I helping and whom am I hurting?” Yet we also know that what each of us does affects more than just ourselves.

“Israel are scattered sheep,” according to a teaching from King Hezekiyah, recorded by the Prophet Jeremiah. Why, the midrash asks, are Israel likened to a sheep? “Because, just as a sheep, when hurt on its head or some other body part, all of its body parts feel it. So it is with Israel. When one of them sins, everyone feels it.” Especially today. When one person on this planet doesn’t follow the rules, it potentially affects all of us. We are in this boat together.

Why, then, do we keep sinning? Why do we keep saying, “I paid for this seat, I get to do what I want in it?” Until we accept that we are no different from those Aspen trees, we will never see how intertwined our roots really are.

---

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 4:6

Among the liberators of Buchenwald was a rabbi named Robert Marcus. When he learned that 904 Jewish children had been hidden and saved by the camp inmates he committed himself to restoring their lives. Rabbi Marcus stayed on in Buchenwald. He eventually arranged safe passage for hundreds of those children into France.

In the summer of 1949 Rabbi Marcus was returning to France when he heard that his own three children had contracted polio. He raced home only to find that Jay, his eldest, had died. Bereft and racked with guilt, Rabbi Marcus reached out to the one person whom he thought could help make sense of such a tragic loss, Albert Einstein. Einstein wrote back. Here is what he said: “A human being, is a part of the whole, called by us, ‘universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest — a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.” He went on to say that we can free ourselves from this prison by widening our “circle of compassion” and embracing all living creatures. Einstein acknowledged that few people can achieve this completely, but striving to do so is essential for a feeling of centeredness.

There is a lot here. It’s Einstein. But his comments reminds us of a few truths: first, we are all part of a much larger whole. Second. We delude ourselves into thinking that we are islands unto ourselves. This delusion imprisons us, which in turn causes us to draw close to our inner circle. On the other hand, when we become aware of the interconnectedness of life, we experience an overwhelming sense of love and compassion, and we embrace all that is. The universe is one, and each human soul desires to return to its original state of oneness with God; liberation, as Einstein called it.

Einstein’s reply rings true, especially today. We are part of a much larger whole, but the unmasked beach goers and party attendees and Harley Davidson rally’ers delude themselves into thinking they are on their own islands. This tiny virus reminds us they are not. We are interdependent. My sneeze here could affect a 98-year-old in Iowa. I am my sister’s keeper. Independence is not a Jewish value.

The Hebrew word Independence, תִּצְטָח (ahts-mah-OOT) comes from the root ט.צ. ח(a.ts.m.), which means, basically, *that which stands out*. This was the sin of Jonah, the main character from this afternoon’s Haftarah. In his hubris, he failed to understand he was connected to his community. Aviva Zorenberg points

out, “Jonah’s sleep was one of denial, of committing the sin of removing himself from the community.”

Isn't this the trap we keep falling into? Somehow, we keep thinking we are separate. This is the delusion Einstein spoke of. We are not separate. We are made of the same things as this table, this robe, this air. We are 99.9 percent the same as every other human on this planet. We are one.

So, what do we do with that awareness? We could just meditate on this oneness, trying our best to enjoy and appreciate moments of nirvana, and focus on the awe that comes from being connected to the greater whole. But is that all? This new-found awareness should move us to ask, “Now what?” Last year we spoke of how our choices around our consumption cause climate change and asked, “What are we going to do about it?” This year, the combination of the coronavirus, the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmad Arbury among so many others at the hands of the police pulled another question out of me: “Gropper, what are **you** going to do besides shake your head at the shame of it?” Hearing Heschel’s adjuration that, “there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that some are guilty, but all are responsible,<sup>2</sup>” I decided to act.

Three conversations took place. One was with our clergy colleagues here in Rye. “What can we do to amplify our voices, to make it clear that at the heart of our religious traditions there is a call for justice, for trying to right the moral ills of society?” And so, amid the protests, we gathered. We prayed, sang, told stories, and included clergy and members of the black churches in Port Chester. We made a promise. We would continue. We would gather to learn together, to ask deep questions, and to listen with empathy. We will meet again in October, under the vine covered trellis at Rye Presbyterian Church.

The second conversation was with Cantor Cooperman and Jackie Kabot who oversees our Tzedek council. What can we as a congregation do? Our Tzedek council decided to begin by doing our own teshuvah, our own inner work. We are reading the New Jim Crow, by Michelle Alexander, and have realized that we have much to learn. We hope to reach out to black churches nearby and to connect--to get to know each other, to learn each other’s stories. If you are interested in joining our efforts, call Cantor Cooperman or me. We’d love to have you.

---

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity.”

The third was with Lieutenant Al Hein of the Rye Police Department. I serve as the department's chaplain. I wanted to let them know they matter too. His response also touched me. "Rabbi, thank you so, so much. I grew up seeing blue as the color of the sky, as one of the colors on our flag. Now, blue is seen as evil. It is so hard." "I imagine it is hard, especially amidst a pandemic," I told him. "I know we have work to do. I also want you to know you are not alone."

We can support the police while simultaneously working to end the systemic racism that has plagued our nation for 400 years. Join us at a special Shabbat service on November 20th as we show gratitude to our first responders just as we continue these efforts to work towards justice.

Like many of you, I view myself as open-minded and fair. But that was because I was staying in my comfort zone. Like Jonah, while a storm brewed around me, I stayed in the safety of my own boat, my own community. But the events of these past months made it clear to me that I can no longer just merrily float along. The words of the Prophets, the imperatives from our Torah, the teachings of the rabbis ring in my ears. Hear Isaiah: "Is this the fast I want? A day for people to starve their bodies?" "No! This is the fast I want: to unlock the chains of wickedness, to untie the knots of servitude, to let the oppressed go free, to break their bonds." Hear Moses, "Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof - Justice, justice shall you pursue." Hear the words of our ancient rabbis, "Just as God is gracious and compassionate, so you should be gracious and compassionate." To ignore these words is to ignore the call of the shofar and to allow the ringing to grow louder. To ignore these words is to ignore the lessons of 400 years of our servitude to Pharaoh, lessons that have long led Jews to speak out for the downtrodden and oppressed. As my colleague Rabbi Rachel Timoner once said, "Neutrality when life is at risk is not a Jewish value. Silence in the face of injustice is not a Jewish value. The Jewish thing to do is to take a stand, to speak, to act."

When it comes to this corona virus we know what we have to do: wear a mask, wash our hands, keep a safe distance, don't touch your face, stay at home if you're sick. When it comes to the injustices we see around us, whether to us as Jews or to others who are marginalized, we can grow in knowledge, empathy and understanding. We can read books, watch movies, speak with others, listen with an open heart. We can also speak out. **We would call out antisemitism if we saw it.** Are we willing to be anti-racists calling out racism when we see it? Are we willing to challenge our own implicit biases, even if it makes us uncomfortable? If

you are thinking, "What can I do, I'm just one person?" remember the words of anthropologist Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

A story from Munich during the reign of the Nazis illustrates the difference one person can make.

A light snow was falling and the streets were crowded with people. Sussie had been riding a city bus home from work when SS storm troopers suddenly stopped it and began demanding passengers' identification papers. Jews were being told to leave the bus and get into a truck around the corner.

Sussie watched from her seat in the rear as the soldiers systematically worked their way down the aisle. She began to tremble, tears streaming down her face. When the man next to her noticed that she was crying, he politely asked her why.

"I don't have the papers you have. I am a Jew. They're going to take me." The man exploded with disgust. He began to curse and scream at her. "You stupid [idiot]," he roared, "I can't stand being near you!"

The SS men asked what all the yelling was about. "Damn her," the man shouted angrily. "My wife has forgotten her papers again! I'm so fed up. She always does this!"

The soldiers laughed and moved on. Sussie never saw him again. She never even knew his name.

When faced with an opportunity that requires inconvenience, self-sacrifice or risk, it's tempting to look away, but as Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes, sometimes you find yourself faced with a task. "This does not mean you need do everything that lands on your doorstep, or that you should assume every risk or make every self-sacrifice. But it does mean that you must tell yourself the truth about where you have been placed and why.

"You do not exercise your freedom by doing what you want. Self-indulgence is not an exercise of freedom. But when you accept the task that destiny seems to have set before you, you become free. Perhaps the only exercise of real freedom comes from doing what you were meant to do all along."

Like the Aspen trees who look like they stand alone, we are, underneath, all connected. With our interdependence comes a shared responsibility to care for one another and to correct wrongs in our shared society. Sometimes the “how” is not obvious, but by now, we should feel that the “why” is. That’s what Yom Kippur leads us to do. May the rest of your fast be easy. May it be filled with meaning. May it invoke in you a greater sense of purpose. Amen.