

Rav Lach: Doing Everything We Can

Five weeks ago, our daughter turned 15 and a half. For those who don't have this date on your radar, it's the moment you get your learner's permit. I am sure many of you have vivid memories – or fears – of passing that milestone. She is doing very well. Her reflexes are good, and she hits the right pedal when we yell, STOP most of the time. It helps a lot that she is fearless. No matter how many close calls we might have in a given trip, she is always ready for the next one. Jaimee and I are having a harder time, sitting in the passenger seat while she changes lanes on Old Dominion. We haven't yet taken her into the parking lot with Trader Joe's in Falls Church – that place is dangerous for the most experienced drivers – and we haven't let her take the highway quite yet. It is a true lesson in the exercise and the release of control. Of realizing what power we have to influence and help. Of doing what we can, and dealing with the limits of what we *can* actually do.

In a religion focused on actions, Yom Kippur is the ultimate day that scrutinizes our actions. What harms did we commit? What dishonesties? What sins of omission? But as you already must know by now, we rabbis usually give the sermons we ourselves need to hear. This year, for so many reasons, I need a sermon on: How do we cope when our actions don't feel like enough, when we are not equipped to prevent hardship, difficulty, pain and suffering. How do we deal with the accidents we cannot prevent and the problems we don't feel we can solve?

I know I am not alone. Those of us who are parents worry about helping our kids succeed in school, academically and socially, and develop the skills they will need to live meaningful lives. Some of you might have just dropped kids off at college and you have no control over how clean they keep their dorm rooms or what time they wake up. We can try to help them with all these things. We can remind them and coach them, but so much is out of our hands. And, we know that our lives are full of other places where we feel the need to do so much, and yet we know that no matter how much we do, the problems may still be there. We might be searching for a job. We may have just been furloughed. We or someone we love may have received a difficult health diagnosis that has no easy answer. We could be struggling to help someone who is not ready to help themselves. All of us have dealt with some of these emotional or personal challenges this past year. And then, there is the

external strain of what is happening in the larger world. Many are looking for ways to make a real difference in what feel like unstoppable events in our public life, in America and in Israel.

These High Holy Days, we seek forgiveness for our limitations. We repent for the moments we couldn't fix, heal, save, change. We need to be forgiven for things we cannot do, and for the fact that anything we can do may not be enough for this moment.

The Torah is full of heroes who feel they cannot do enough. Elijah, whose cup we fill at the Seder, at one point wants to give up, crying out, "I am no better than my predecessors." King David is devastated that he will never build the Temple. As I struggle with this reality of incompleteness, perhaps the text that speaks to me the most is one about Moses. At the end of the long journey in the desert, as the people are about to go into the land, Moses learns he will not go with them. In the Midrash, He begs God, "Please, let me go on with the people. You can send me as a beast or a bird!" He cannot imagine not being there to defend and guide his community. The words God says, in response to Moses, God could have said to all of these biblical heroes: *Rav lach*. You have done so much. Your merit does not depend upon completion of every task.

Some of us share the type A personalities of Moses, David and Elijah. All of us have moments when we feel what we are able to do is not enough. This Yom Kippur, the message the Torah has for us comes from these words to Moses. *Rav Lach*. All of us are showing up, speaking up, helping out, planting the seeds of tomorrow, and we plant them with the hope that they will grow into something bigger. Our merit does not depend upon completion. *Rav Lach*. You have done so much.

The Yom Kippur liturgy is full of messages that we are not perfect and that nothing more is expected of us than doing what we can. Did you ever wonder why the first moment is the Kol Nidrei, which nullifies all our vows in case we are unable to fulfill them? That was written for us Jews of today. The gates of repentance are kept open until the very last minute, as if God is inviting everyone in, even the procrastinators. And in *N'ilah*, our concluding service, when we speak of the doors closing, it feels to me that they are closing slowly. You can hear a gentle nudge over the loudspeakers that it's time to come in and

begin a new year, like a Broadway show that tries not to begin until everyone is seated, but instead of flickering lights, we have the shofar that reminds us. Throughout this holy day, we are assured of forgiveness over and over. And at the same time, Yom Kippur calls on us to seek out what we *can* do. The famous *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer – the one that lists who shall live and who shall die – is alienating for some of us, because it paints a picture of God’s judgment, an idea to which many of us, dare I say most of us, do not subscribe. The most difficult part of this prayer is that it makes us feel the future is set and we can’t change what happens. Although some of that is true, we can change what we do with the news we are given. How we move forward with the setback or diagnosis. What we do to challenge ourselves, and how we show up for the people around us. The real point of the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer is the tag line at the end, telling us the three things that will temper the severity of the divine decree: repentance, prayer and charity – nothing more than the very human work of trying to do good in the world. All that is asked is our best. All that is forbidden is to do nothing. You cannot disappear.

Lo tuchal l’hitalelem. You cannot disappear. These words are a personal favorite commandment of mine in Deuteronomy. They follow a list of individual responsibilities. What I love about this commandment is the surprising way it is phrased. The word *L’hitalelem* is understood as, “ignore.” But, it has a connotation of hiding yourself or becoming invisible. So, you cannot ignore, becomes you cannot disappear. For me, this recognizes that there will be times when what is asked of us feels like too much. In those times, all that is expected is not to do nothing. Not to disappear. *Rav Lach*. Just staying in the game will be enough.

Lo tuchal l’hitalelem was in my mind five months ago, when I got a call from my sister. My mother had struggled with Alzheimer’s disease for many years. It was spring break, and I was in Bethany Beach out to dinner with my family, and my father, who was visiting. We were sitting outside. There was music in the background, and people around us enjoying their vacations. If my mom had been there, I am sure she would have ordered the Reuben sandwich with sweet potato fries. That was when my sister called to tell my dad and me that my mother had stopped eating. The doctors were saying she could die that day. “You

cannot disappear” echoed in my mind as my dad and I drove to the airport, buying our tickets in the car. We were lucky enough to have another few days with my mother, one of the most memorable times of my life. If you had walked into her memory care room in Marin County California, you would have seen loved ones with her their hands entangled with hers, people sitting on her bed, a small room crowded with visitors that included friends, family and our rabbis. At times we had to squeeze by each other or rotate guests to make room for others. You would have heard a lot of noise: guitar playing and singing, Bye Bye Love, You Are My Sunshine and the MTA Song, our family favorites. You would have heard busy footsteps trying to adjust pillows and get water to dab on my mother’s lips and make her more comfortable. You would have heard the stories we remembered of her that made us all laugh, like when she put an airborne tablet in her mouth instead of dissolving it in a glass of water and tried to take it with a sip like a pill, and it exploded out of her mouth. My mom loved to laugh. Or promises, that we would continue to make the creamed spinach she used to make us. You would have heard thank you’s and some quiet and loud crying. And then, finally, at 8:00 in the morning, you would have seen a man lying next his wife of sixty-one years, telling her it’s ok to let go. You’ve done everything you need to do. *Rav Lach.* We, too, knew the limits of what we could do for my mother. I am glad we got the opportunity to embrace doing the things we could.

All of us, every day, are refusing to disappear in the face of challenges that are too big and problems we cannot fix. We sit with our kid and try to help, even if their math lesson is way over our head. We give our friend the advice they badly need, even if we cannot get them to follow it. We give so much of our time and love, helping our aging parents, being there for loved ones who are ill, volunteering our time and giving donations to charities that can meet just a fraction of the need in this moment.

This *is, indeed*, a moment of great need all around us. When we look at what has to be done, we want drastic actions with big results. Whether we are talking about America or Israel, our world is in need of repair. Rabbi Tarfon, who also lived in a turbulent time, during the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, gave a powerful teaching: “The day is short. The work is great. The laborers are sluggish. The reward is abundant. And the Master is urgent.”

There is a rebuke in this teaching. And yet, how can we, the workers, help being sluggish when the work is so great? It is overwhelming. Finding a way to help end the violence in Israel and Gaza. Preserving our democracy and protecting the vulnerable at home. The actions we *can* take feel inadequate to the task. How do we begin when we know we might not see the outcome we hoped, and how do we start on our list, knowing as we accomplish one item, another will be added? We must keep going. We cannot disappear. We must do what we can do. Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum said, “People tend to overestimate what can be accomplished in one year, and underestimate what can be accomplished in ten.” Your actions now may not have visible results, but they still make a difference. *Rav Lach*, you are doing more than you know.

There is a Midrash about an Israelite family in Egypt. Times are unbearably cruel. A decree has gone out from Pharaoh: every baby boy born to the Hebrews is to be drowned in the Nile. Families live in terror. Mothers carry their pregnancies with dread, wondering if the child they bear will live to see the light of day. One man, broken by grief, looks at his wife and children and says: “Why should we go on? Why bring new life into the world only to see it cast into the river? Better to stop, better to end this cycle of heartbreak.” And he decides not to conceive another child. Others, hearing of his decision, do the same. Homes are broken, hope is nowhere to be found. The darkness of Pharaoh’s decree spreads into the bodies of the people themselves and takes over.

But one small voice rises in protest. A young daughter, standing in the back of the crowd, her voice taking on more power as she begins to speak, getting louder with each word and striving to be heard. She says to her father straight on, in front of her community: “Your decree is worse than Pharaoh’s. Pharaoh ordered death for the boys. But you — by giving up on bringing life — you doom boys and girls alike. Pharaoh is wicked; perhaps his decree will not endure. But you are righteous! If you give up, your choice will surely endure.”

Her words pierce him. He realizes she is right. In his anguish he has chosen despair, but in her clarity she chooses courage. The man returns to his wife and vows never again to allow himself to disappear. Time passes, and the man’s wife conceives, filling their family with

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hope. Their baby boy's name is Moses. His older sister Miriam's small act of protest made his life possible, and in a generation will change the fate of their people.

The work we do today may not yield quick results. We may sometimes wonder if we are making a difference. There is a saying by Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The creation of a thousand forests is in one acorn." Little things can have large results. Our Torah started with ten commandments, and now it takes a year to scroll through. This congregation began with 37 families, and now, the Yom Kippur service is in four different locations, and it was probably hard to find a good seat. The responsibility to fix every problem and address every injustice, feels like too much. But we will refuse to disappear. We will show up, speak up, help out, plant the seeds of tomorrow, and we will plant them with the hope that they will grow into something bigger. *Rav Lach.*