How Can I Help?

A Sermon for Yom Kippur Morning 5783
Delivered by
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I begin with words of gratitude to my dear colleague and friend Rabbi Philip Bazeley who leads our congregation with kindness and caring and the gifts of his heart and mind; to Ina Horn, our Temple's president; no president knows what her or his tenure will be like. You, Ina, have led us with a loving hand during a time in our history unlike any other. My thanks to Cantor Stanton and our wonderful and dedicated Temple's NO RINGER Choir, along with my precious bar mitzvah student David Schlossberg at the keyboard; you inspire us and lead us in the music that touches our hearts year after year since the day I arrived here nearly fifty years ago.

And my heartfelt thanks to all of you, our beloved congregation. So many of you reached out to me following my surgery and rehabilitation, and so many more shared their condolences and expressions of comfort and kindness to me following my mother's death. For the past five months I have felt your embrace which has had a significant impact on my healing and has comforted me through my days of mourning. Over the course of my lifetime, I have served the role of comforter but until this summer I had never personally experienced the profound comforting presence of sacred community. I am deeply touched.

Two days after the surgery to replace my hip for the third time, near midnight, I found myself awake and looked up at the clock on the wall in my hospital room. I noticed at that moment that the clock had stopped at ten minutes to midnight. I said to myself, "Bennett, I think for you time has come to a standstill." I wasn't sure what to make of that moment, but I thought of it as a kind of Yom Kippur experience; reflect on the meaning of your life while time has been suspended. Your life may have hung in the balance, but the gift of life has been restored. You are alive and no greater gift can be given to you. Make the most of it."

For the next few days nurses and doctors and aides went in and out of my room. No one noticed the stopped clock, and when I pointed it out to some of them, they shrugged their shoulders and went about their business. The clock remained at ten minutes to midnight. On the morning of day five a nurse came and told me that soon I would be transferred to rehab, and they would be coming for me shortly. A few minutes later, a young aide came bounding into my room. He suddenly stopped, looked at the clock, said "how do you like that!" Then he took the clock off the wall, returned after a few minutes, and placed the clock back on the wall. The time was correct, and the second hand was moving. He never said a word to me. He just left. And I said to myself, "Bennett, I guess time for you has begun again." And soon afterward I left the hospital.

That I may live in the house of the Divine

You and I are gathered here (and via livestream) this Yom Kippur morning at our most intense period of introspection and reflection. For us, time has come to a halt. The world around us remains in crisis, cars go up and down Livingston Avenue, business continues to function…. But here you and I sit in our beautiful sanctuary and contemplate the meaning of life, consider our actions of the past year and search for forgiveness for our shortcomings; and yes, each of us reflects upon the meaning of the precious gift of life.

We learn from the Rabbis of our tradition that Teshuva, true reflection, and forgiveness, does not occur in a flash, in an hour, or even a day. That is why the Rabbis have guided us by calling upon us to recite one specific psalm each day for fifty days, starting with the first day of the month of Elul and ending on Simchat Torah. That psalm, that beautiful biblical poem, Psalm 27, is one that I have been reading every day now since the beginning of Elul. I have read it together with a group of virtual friends who join for minyan and who share in reflecting on the meaning of life, loss, healing, the power of prayer, and recognizing that life is a precious gift to behold every single day.

Permit me to share part of Psalm 27 with you. You can find it on page 140 in *Mishkan Hanefesh*. Turn to it now if you would. The traditional chanting is a simple but beautiful and even haunting melody. Many have written newer melodies for Psalm 27 giving it meaning in so many ways. But here is the traditional melody.

בְּהֵיכָלוֹ׃ וּלְבַקֵּר בְּנֹעַם־יְהוָה לַחֲזוֹת חֵיֵי כָּל־יְמֵי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה שִׁבְתִּי אֲבַקֵּשׁ אוֹתָהּ מְאַת־יְהוָה שָׁאַלְתִּי ׀ אַחַת

One thing have I sought from Adonai … how I long for it:
That I may live in the house of the Divine
all the days of my life,
That I may look upon the sweetness of Adonai,
And gaze in delight at God's Temple.

The Psalmist is asking, if I only had one question to ask of God, what would it be? How could I live in a world worthy of God's presence? At a time when we have experienced the ravages of COVID, when we have seen the powerful and destructive forces of climate change that have produced terrifying hurricanes and ferocious forest fires, when our leaders have focused on maintaining power at all costs rather than working together for the common good – this season of repentance and this day of Yom Kippur calls on us to consider that the earth is a Divine creation and how fortunate we are to live in such a world.

The Psalmist dreams of being able to see "the sweetness of Adonai," that we are the hands of God on this place we call earth, and that our hands are to be instruments of goodness, kindness, and justice. Not empty words but true acts of *Gemilut chasadim*. Such a Divine calling is ours, to labor on behalf of a loving God, and touch others with the sacredness of the Divine spirit.

And the psalmist suggests that the place from which such kindness shall emanate is from – our Temple, all Temples, where God might come by on any given day, peek inside and say, "this is a place worthy of my presence. In here the people have created a *mikdash m'at*, a small

sanctuary to serve as model to the rest of the world. Oh, how wonderful it would be if all around they would say of us, of our congregation –Anshe Emeth – that it is a community unlike any other. The kindness that emanates from its congregants, the commitment to a world of justice and integrity for all – may we live up to our name, Anshe Emeth, a people of truth, of dignity, and of integrity in all that we do.

Listen to these words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. He says it far better than me.

> The question is: To what extent will we see our present interconnectedness …? As the work of man or as a call from God to a greater humanity, as well as to a greater self-restraint? As for me, I believe that we are being summoned by God to see in the human other a trace of the divine Other. The test – so lamentably failed by the great powers …-- is to see the divine presence in the face of a stranger, to heed the cry of those who are disempowered in this age of unprecedented powers; who are hungry and poor and ignorant and uneducated, whose human potential is being denied the chance to be expressed. That is the faith of Abraham and Sarah…. We are not gods, but we are summoned by God – to do God's work of love and justice and compassion and peace.

And Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the greats of our people, who spoke truth to power, said it said it so poetically. He taught:

> Life without integrity is like loosely hanging threads, each fraying from the main cloth, while in acts of piety we learn to understand that every instant is like a thread raveling out of eternity to form a delicate tassel. We must not cast off the threads but weave them into the design of an eternal fabric. Each day points to eternity; the fate of all time depends upon a single moment.

From despair to joy

In this past year so many have experienced single moments of life and living. For some they have been moments of struggle– death of a loved one, facing a debilitating disease, the ravages of a hurricane. Add to such experiences what we witness each day through our media, political ads, and division in our country and throughout the world it would be far too easy to fall into despair. But philosopher Hermann Hesse reminds us that "God does not send us despair in order to kill us; God sends it in order to awaken us to a new life."

Yes, there are also incredible moments of joy – the birth of a baby, a wedding couple standing under the chuppah, a milestone moment. It is those moments that sustain us. I call them *Shehechiyanu* moments, and they should be celebrated with blessing, with song, and with rejoicing.

Permit me now to share with you a single moment, a precious moment in time. Among my readings this summer I came upon a memoir entitled *Hello Darkness my old friend,* by Sanford Greenberg. Greenberg grew up in Buffalo, the child of Holocaust survivors, and graduated from Bennett High School. He went to Columbia University on full scholarship, and

while there met a fellow classmate by the name of Arthur Garfunkel from Forest Hills, Queens. They became best friends and roommates.

One day in November of their Junior year, Greenberg came back from class and complained to Garfunkel of having difficulty seeing. Turns out he was going blind. In despair he returned to Buffalo believing that his college career and life were permanently to be altered. Being a true friend, Garfunkel followed him to Buffalo and insisted that Greenberg return to school.

"Well, I think you have to come back," Arthur said. "It just seems like the only reasonable thing to do." "What are you talking about? You're crazy. I don't want to discuss it." "Well, you're going to have to discuss it at some point. I'm going to make you discuss it." "Well, I don't want to." "Sanford. Stop." He repeated that he would help me if I returned."

"Just how are you going to help me, Arthur?" "Well, I could get all your class notes, all your assignments. I could quiz you for your exams. I could walk you to your classes and then pick you up." "How are you going to do that and still handle your own classes and reading?" "We can figure something out. I think you're dodging the main question, though." "Which is what?" "Which is whether or not you'll return." Arthur then laid out his underlying premise: everything else would fall into line once I made that decision. His tone of voice suddenly changed. He began to sing: "Oh Sanford, Sanford, Sanford…I made you out of clay, and now you're dry and ready. So, Sanford, we must play." With that, his intensity vanished; we both laughed and put our arms on each other's shoulders.

Greenberg went back to school and Garfunkel was true to his word. He was with him to every class, for every assignment, for being his friend. But Greenberg remained in despair. So, one day, in downtown NYC, something happened. Garfunkel said to his friend, "Sanford, you stay here. I have something I have to do. Greenberg waited a while, but Garfunkel didn't return. Not knowing what else to do, Greenberg worked his way back to Columbia. He fell, he walked into people and walls, he got cut, he bled; but incredibly he managed to two take two subways and got off at the stop for Columbia.

"I felt my way to the iron gates and went through onto College Walk. As I began to make my way, I was stopped by a young man I recognized by smell as Arthur. "Oops, excuse me, sir," he said, a slight sardonic emphasis on the last word. We were silent for a moment as we stood near the university gates. I wanted to kill him. Then, in his normal voice, he said abruptly, "I knew you could do it…but I wanted to be sure you knew you could do it." He had been shadowing me all along.... I grabbed his hands, exultantly raised them, and swung him around me. In sweeping circular motions, we waltzed out onto College Walk….

"That moment at the gates of the university, the moment of my triumphant survival of that subway odyssey, was the moment when fear—fear of risk, fear of movement, fear of change—was vanquished within me forever. I can say only that I realized something profound—my friends and family had become angels who would be with me and never leave. I was strong because of the strength we gave each other." Greenberg graduated, went on to Harvard and Oxford, served as White House Fellow, and so much more.

My dear friends, you with whom I have walked all these years, there is no greater nor more important message I can share with you this Yom Kippur day: We are strong because of the strength we give to each other.

אֲבַקֵּשׁ: אוֹתָהּ מְאֵת־יְהוָה שֶׁאֲלָתִי ו אַחַת

Yes, f I could ask only one thing of God, what would it be? My colleague Rabbi Debra Robbins states it so beautifully. She writes:

> "It's nearly impossible to decide.
> My prayer bends toward gratitude, not supplication.
> "Thank You, Strength, for the steps I take as I walk…"
> "Thank You, Wisdom, for the opportunity to study Torah."
> "Thank You, Generosity, for abundance in my life."
> "Thank You, Protection, for keeping us alive
> And allowing us to reach this moment."
> Endless gratitude,
> Every new day of every New Year.
>
> If I could ask God for only one thing, what would it be?
> I have no requests, only questions …
> Maybe…
> Who can…?
> When will…?
> What if…?
> Where was…?
> Why did?
> No, Now I know my question.
>
> If I could ask God something,
> Not for something,
> The one thing I would ask is:
> "How can I help?"

On this Yom Kippur morning, as we contemplate so many thoughts and questions about life and living, let us ask the most important question of all, "how can I help? How can I help make this community, this place I love, this precious nation, our beloved Israel, this world in which we live… How can I behold each day so that I may live in the house of the Divine all the days of my life?

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