

Rabbi Beth H Klafter
Yom Kippur 5777
October 12, 2016

We Shall Be Called “Repairers of the Breach”

I was probably about five, home one evening with my older brother and sister; our parents were out. I accidentally broke the handle off a coffee cup, a green coffee cup; I’m sure it was one of my mother’s favorites because just about anything green would have been. Realizing that they would definitely notice it was broken, figuring that I wouldn’t get away with blaming my brother for this one, I left the cup and its handle on the kitchen counter with a note, written with the handwriting and spelling of a five year old, “I broke this cup. Sorry.” In the morning, I recall being praised for my honesty and my apology; and my dad helped me glue the pieces back together.

It’s the perfect Yom Kippur lesson: if we break something, whether inadvertently or with intent, the first step is to acknowledge our wrong-doing, then we seek forgiveness and we do what we can to repair the situation – whether it is a material object or a relationship.

Yes, the broken cup does point to a High Holiday theme, but that’s not my Yom Kippur theme for this year. That’s too easy – not that seeking forgiveness is effortless, but the predicament of repairing a broken coffee cup is simple. Like the big red button sold at Staples a few years ago that announced, “That was EASY,” when we pushed it. How I wish we had an ‘EASY’ button for the world today.

We just sang these words: “*Hashevanu Adonai*, Help us Return to You, Adonai, then truly shall we turn, *Chadesh Yamenu K’kedem*.” It’s an odd phrase in Hebrew, *Chadesh Yamenu K’kedem*: *Chadesh* means new, and *Kedem* means ancient or old. The prayer book translates the Hebrew as, “Renew our days, as in the past.” More precisely it means: Make our days NEW, like they were when they were OLD.

I’m reminded of the quip, “Nostalgia ain’t what it used to be.” Or the lyric from singer-songwriter, Carly Simon, “Stay right here, ‘cause these are the good old days.”

Chadesh Yamenu K’kedem: It is actually pointless to pray for the world to return to an earlier, less complex, less damaged time. Pointless like the task of the Greek King, Sisyphus, who I mentioned last week: destined to push a boulder up a mountain, only to have it continually roll back down. It’s senseless to yearn for a time filled only with goodness and pure blessing because that time never actually existed.

Last week I spoke about how making lists can help us organize and prioritize projects and goals. So we can start a checklist of what needs to be done:

- Speak out for others

- Face injustice in the world
- Find freedom for those enslaved
- Provide for the hungry and the homeless
- Comfort the distressed
- Support the community

We see these needs all around us.

Interestingly enough though – this is not a new list of problems in the world: This is the list we just heard in the Haftarah portion from the book of Isaiah, written well over 2000 years ago. Isaiah continues to declare that if we respond to these commands and fulfill them, we will be called '**repairer of the breach.**'

I have been wrestling with this phrase **repairer of the breach** for several months. I've been drawn to it again and again – it speaks to me with power and depth. Where is the breach today? What is it that has to be repaired?

I believe it is a breach in our sense of hope that we can make a difference in the world.

We have lost confidence in our ability to face the challenges of the world because they are enormous and overwhelming. The mountain of work there is to be done looms large above us like the mountain of Sisyphus and perhaps we reason that there is no point in starting the climb. If we think we cannot do everything, we may become numbed into doing nothing.

Surely, our first obligation is to ourselves and our family, immediate loved ones. Those obligations are wonderful; they are also often complicated and exhausting. We run the risk of focusing our limited energy and time only on ourselves and not on the world outside of us.

There is a phenomenon called the bystander effect. The more people there are around in a time of need, the less likely it is that anyone will help, because each 'bystander' assumes someone else will tend to the issue. Unconsciously we are susceptible to this kind of inaction.

I am reminded of this story which I love to tell:

In the village of Chelm, before the High Holy Days one year, the Wise Men had a great idea! For their meal on Rosh Hashanah, every person would bring a bottle of their best wine, and pour it into a communal barrel. The resulting mixture of wine would be the best that Chelm could offer.

As each Wise Man arrived, he poured his bottle into the barrel; and the festivities began. When it came time to make Kiddush, the Rabbi turned the spigot and poured the first cup. To everyone's surprise, the liquid was clear! It was a barrel full of water – not a drop of wine to be found. Each person had brought a bottle of water, instead of wine – they each thought: "why should I bring a bottle of my best wine? One bottle of water mixed in to the barrel will not dilute the wine very much – my bottle of water will make no difference!"

We have all had moments when we are tempted to bring water and not wine – or nothing at all. Perhaps assuming, like the Wise Men of Chelm, that our contribution might have no impact.

Though we may feel like Sisyphus trudging up the mountain, his story is not our story. Our task is not pointless. Our efforts DO matter.

Our lesson is found in the words of the rabbis of the Talmud, Pirke Avot: "*Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor...*" You are not required to complete the work, nor are you free to ignore it." With these words, the rabbis of old are teaching us that we must just begin; we must take a first step, and a second and a third towards the work waiting for us in the world. We shouldn't fall victim to a paralysis of hope, stopping us in our tracks before we even begin.

The collective 'sin' of our time is that we may think we are not responsible or capable, that we might not be the repairers of the breach.

Chadesh Yamenu K'kedem: Perhaps there never was a time in human history that was 'easy'. In every generation, prophets of all kinds have warned us to improve ourselves and our world. But for every one of us there was probably a time when the solution to problems was as simple as glue on a coffee cup. Return each one of us, O God, to a time when we felt empowered and strong and hopeful – remind us, Adonai, that WE are the repairers, each and every one of us. And the time is NOW.

Two decades ago on this bema, standing in this spot, some of you may remember Rabbi Troupp, alav haShalom, holding a challah in his hands as he delivered a sermon on a Yom Kippur morning. His directive to our congregation that day was that we are responsible for those who are hungry and in need. It is the message of the Haftarah portion we read this morning and the same portion that was read that morning 20 years ago and every Yom Kippur in between. The verses are from the 58th chapter of the prophet Isaiah.

Among Rabbi Troupp's greatest legacies to this congregation and to the world was that sermon; it was the sermon that inspired the creation of Temple Beth David's social action committee, **ISAIAH 58 – named for this morning's portion.**

Once upon a time, there was an old woman who used to go to the ocean to do her writing. She would walk on the beach every morning before she began her work. Early one morning, she was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and saw the vast beach littered with starfish as far as the eye could see. Off in the distance, the old woman noticed a little girl picking up starfish one by one and tossing each one gently back into the water. The girl came closer and the woman called out, "Good morning! May I ask what you are doing?" The young girl looked up and replied, "Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide washed them up on the beach and they can't get back to the sea by themselves," the girl replied. "When the sun gets high, they will die, unless I throw them back into the water." The old woman replied, "But there must be tens of thousands of starfish on this beach. I'm afraid you won't really be able to make much of a difference." The girl bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it as far as she

could into the ocean. Then she turned and said, "To that one, it made all the difference in the world!"

Like the little girl on the beach, the efforts and projects of Isaiah 58 have not solved every problem. World hunger and poverty still exist; there are still children on Long Island whose lives are hard. Nonetheless, returning to my topic of LISTS, here is a brief inventory of what we, as individuals, working together, and as a congregation, HAVE done in nearly 20 years – at the very least:

- We have made 57,000 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
- 25,000 personal care 'wash kits'
- 15,000 'bags of fun' with toys and treats for children in shelters and food pantries
- We have delivered hundreds of holiday meals on Thanksgiving and Passover
- Our students have written nearly 1000 cards to Israeli soldiers and US Veterans
- We have collected over 30,000 pounds of food during our annual Yom Kippur food drives.

Robert F. Kennedy wrote: "Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a .. ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy ... those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression, resistance [and suffering]."

We can continue to counter the 'alphabet of woes' we read earlier this morning, with **alphabets of action and hope**. Let me suggest just a few letters in my alphabet for us this year.

- For the letter **H**, last night I mentioned one new initiative called, **HOURS AGAINST HATE**. Its goal is to urge people to pledge hours of their time to help end hate.
- **K is for KINDNESS** – in a world and time that feels so unkind, let us make an effort each day to bring a little more kindness to others; we can all use it.
- Towards the end of our alphabet of action this year is the letter **V, for VOTE** on Election Day, less than one month from today on November 8th. Every vote counts. In American history, there is a lengthy record of 'close votes' in which individual ballots decided an outcome. It is also important to remember that this is not just a presidential election. Just as each one of us makes a difference in the voting booth, every elected official makes a difference in the leadership and direction of our towns, our county, our state and our nation. Transportation shouldn't be a barrier to voting for anyone. As I wrote in my monthly bulletin article, if you or your neighbor needs help getting to your local polling place, please let me know. And if you have the time to offer a ride to someone else, please join me that day as a driver. There are Blue postcards in the lobby for you to complete if you can **GIVE a RIDE** or you need to **GET a RIDE**. You can also email me or

call the temple office in the next couple of weeks. Every vote counts: every ride will make a difference.

This summer, I had the pleasure of spending a Shabbat morning at our Reform Movement's Eisner Camp in Massachusetts. During services, a few of our TBD students together with other campers sang a song they had written. Their words teach us much about becoming repairers of the breach.

Be the One

I believe I can be the one

I believe t'hi'yei ha'e'chad

I believe I can be the one

We start things

We light the spark

We make a change

And we work hard

We cannot complete it all

Or refuse to do our part

I believe I can be the one

I believe t'hi'yei ha'e'chad

I believe I can be the one

Be the One

Each of must be THE ONE.

In the year 5777 may our hope and our strength be renewed.

Let us remember we are all repairers of the breach.