

Caring for the Oppressed D'var Torah for Kol Nidre 5780 (2019) Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

Grey material omitted from spoken presentation.

הֲלוֹא זֶה צוֹם אֲבָחֶרְהוּ פִתְחֵם חֲרָצְבוֹת רָשָׁע הַתֵּר אֲגִדּוֹת מוֹטָה וְשַׁלַּח רְצוּצִים חֲפָשִׁים וְקַל מוֹטָה תִּנְתַּקוּ

Is the following not the fast that God desires: loosen the chains of evil, untie the cords of the yoke, set the oppressed free, and break every yoke.¹

These words from the Haftarah that we read tomorrow capture the essence of the meaning of our Yom Kippur fast. God criticizes people who are apparently following the rituals of fasts but don't understand that dedication to God's rituals is vapid if it is done in the context of immoral behavior and an immoral society.

In this verse, God tells us that our fast should inspire us to identify those afflicted and to work to resolve their troubles. So, tonight I would like to talk about some of the ways our society mistreats people and how we can have a hand in "setting the oppressed free" as God envisions.

One of the most obvious forms of oppression is economic oppression. There are many people in the world, including in our local community who are financially desperate. How should we respond to this form of oppression? The Haftarah tells us that through our fasting we should be inspired to act on behalf of those in financial need. Continuing on the theme of what kind of fast God desires, God says:

הֲלוֹא פָּרַס לָרֹעֵב לַחֶמֶךְ וְעֲנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תָּבִיא בֵּיתְךָ כִּי תִרְאֶה עָרֹם וְכִסִּיתוֹ וּמִבְשָׂרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם:

Is it not to break off of your bread to the needy and bring the wretched poor into your home, when you see a naked person clothe him, and do not hide from your kin.²

One responsibility we should consider on Yom Kippur is our responsibility to care for people in financial distress, both in terms of our own charitable acts and in terms of advocating for a society which provides maximum support and opportunity for people in need.

But people aren't only oppressed by a lack of financial resources. The Mishnah teaches, "כַּשֵּׁם שֶׁאֵין שְׂאֻנָּה בְּמִקַּח וּמִמְכָּר כֵּן אֵין שְׂאֻנָּה בְּדִבְרִים," just as there is oppression in financial matters, so, too, there is oppression through words.³ The way we speak to one another can cut even more sharply than a knife. Commenting on the Mishnah, the Talmud cites

¹ Isaiah 58:6.

² Isaiah 58:7.

³ Mishnah Bava Metzia 4:10.

an opinion that publicly embarrassing a person is akin to spilling blood.⁴

Sometimes, without even realizing it, we may use language that hurts another person, perhaps making a comment about a person's race, religion, intellectual abilities, mental illness, body, clothing choices, or gender identity. Or maybe we hear someone else making an inappropriate comment and we don't summon up the courage to respond to the inappropriate comment. Hurtful language has real consequences. According to one study by the American Osteopathic Association, 31% of adults in the United States report being bullied.⁵ Although we hear a lot about bullying among children, it is not a problem limited to youth. Further, bullying can contribute to numerous health conditions, including gastrointestinal problems, elevated blood pressure, mood disorders, self-harming behavior including suicide, and eating disorders.⁶ One example of such language that many of us may slip up with is "fat shaming." New York Times health reporter Gina Kolata reports that, in large part due to such fat shaming, overweight "people are more prone to anxiety and depression."⁷ Often we may give ourselves a pass on fat shaming under the mistaken impression that our words will encourage a person to lose weight, but it turns out that, quoting the article, "weight shaming can set off rounds of binge eating and avoidance of exercise."⁸

How should we respond to verbal oppression? First and foremost, by paying close attention to the language we use and by responding when we hear others speak harshly. Judaism speaks of the value of שמירת הלשון, guarding our lips from evil. In fact, we say at the end of every Amidah, "א-להי נצור לשוני מרע," Lord, guard my tongue from evil." The need to consider the consequences of our language is not a new age concept of "political correctness," but a value deeply engrained in Jewish thought. We must teach our youth the importance of avoiding language that is hurtful to others and model this behavior for them. By the way, when we teach children that "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me," we must make sure they understand that in fact their words do have the potential to cause real harm even as we encourage them to refuse to be hurt by words.

Next, I'd like to think a little bit about #MeToo. Thank God, our society is starting to face up to the fact that a staggering number of people are victimized by the abuses highlighted by this movement. For too long, our society has helped sweep these issues under the rug. According to a 2018 survey, 51% of women reported experiencing

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 58b.

⁵ See "The Long Reach of Adult Bullying," <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/mind/articles/2017-12-15/how-adult-bullying-impacts-your-mental-and-physical-health>. See further <https://osteopathic.org/2017/11/15/bullying-in-america-survey-finds-nearly-one-third-of-americans-31-have-been-bullied-as-an-adult/>. Note that not all bullying is verbal (see e.g. <http://www.bullyingstatistics.org/content/adult-bullying.html> for types of bullying).

⁶ Id.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/02/sunday-review/the-shame-of-fat-shaming.html>.

⁸ Id.

unwelcome touching, and 27% reported experiencing assault.⁹ 43% of men experienced some form of sexual harassment during their lifetime.¹⁰ The prevalence of such incidents is significantly higher for members of the LGBTQ+ community.¹¹

How should we respond to this form of oppression? By insisting on people's right to absolute discretion over who touches them and how. We must teach our children that they have absolute sovereignty over their own bodies – even if it means they will refuse that big, wet kiss from Aunt Millie – and that they must respect the sovereignty that other people have over their bodies. We should create an environment wherein people feel safe, where victims feel empowered to speak up for themselves, and where people know that the community will respond appropriately if an issue arises. This doesn't have to mean that we will punish an alleged perpetrator without sufficient proof – according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, the prevalence of false reports of assault is between 2% and 10%¹² - but it does mean that we have to take claims seriously, provide all the support that is needed, and not stigmatize a person for making an accusation that sometimes cannot be substantiated.

Finally, in the context of this sermon there is one issue that I feel duty-bound to address, even though it gets me about as close to talking about politics from the pulpit as I ever do. But please note that I am **not** going to place partisan blame or suggest any particular policy solution. It's been largely supplanted in the news lately, but we still have a terrible crisis at our southern border. The Haftarah we read tomorrow begs us to “pour out your soul to the hungry and sate the soul of the afflicted.”¹³ We have masses of people who are coming to our border out of desperation, many fleeing from violence and just about all fleeing from dire economic situations. We may not be able to take all these people in, and many of these people, in their desperation, may even be gaming our system. But we must, as a nation, do everything within reason to make sure that these people are treated with dignity and kept safe – especially the children who had no say in their coming here. Each of us should speak out about this point.

In 1973, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote an essay explaining his involvement in the Vietnam peace movement. He explained that one of his main inspirations was what he learned from his study of the prophets, no doubt including the prophet of our Haftarah:

⁹ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/02/21/587671849/a-new-survey-finds-eighty-percent-of-women-have-experienced-sexual-harassment>

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¹¹ According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center's “Statistics about Sexual Violence” found at https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media_packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf 46.4% of lesbians, 74.9% bisexual women and 43.3% heterosexual women reported sexual violence other than rape during their lifetimes, while 40.2% gay men, 47.4% bisexual men and 20.8% heterosexual men reported sexual violence other than rape during their lifetimes.

¹² Id.

¹³ Isaiah 58: 10, “וְתִפְקֹךְ לָרֹעֵב נֶפֶשְׁךָ וְנַפְשׁ נְעֻמָּה תִשְׁבְּעֶה.”

There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul ...

The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings. It also became clear to me that in regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty while all are responsible. 'Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor' (Leviticus 19:15). This is not a recommendation but an imperative, a supreme commandment."¹⁴

Our Torah portion for tomorrow tells us that on Yom Kippur, "וְעִנִּיתֶם אֶת-נַפְשֵׁיכֶם, you shall afflict your souls."¹⁵ Our Haftarah tells us that afflicting our souls for one day should inspire us to spend our entire lifetime caring and advocating for all afflicted souls. I hope we will spend some of our Yom Kippur considering how we can do just that. If we succeed that task, the Haftarah tells us:

אֲזַיִבְקַע כְּשֹׁחַר אוֹרְךָ וְאֶרְכֶּתָּ מְהֵרָה תִצְמַח וְהִלָּךְ לְפָנֶיךָ צִדְקָךְ כְּבוֹד יְקֻמָּךְ יֵאֱסָפָךְ
Then your light will shine as the dawn and your healing will quickly sprout forth, your righteousness shall precede you and God's glory will gather you in.¹⁶

May our fast today inspire our deeds for the coming year and may our deeds in the coming year be a beacon of hope to those who are in need.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR END OF SERVICE

Dear God, you taught us to afflict our souls on Yom Kippur and you called upon us thereby to be inspired to care for the afflicted. As we deny ourselves the luxury of leather shoes, teach us to become aides and advocates for those who lack even their basic needs. As we refrain from putting food in our mouths on this day, inspire us to choose the words that come out of our mouths wisely and with compassion each and every day. As you commanded us to refrain from physical intimacy on Yom Kippur, inspire us with understanding for those who have been denied the right to sovereignty over their own bodies. As we refrain from bathing, help us guide our country to provide for the basic needs of all those who seek her protection. As you called upon your prophet to cry aloud about our iniquities,¹⁷ teach us to be your mouthpiece in our society today, advocating for justice and righteousness, so that, in the words of your prophet, our light may shine as the dawn.

¹⁴ "The Reason for my Involvement in the Peace Movement," in Abraham Joshua Heschel, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996, p. 224-225.

¹⁵ Leviticus 16:31.

¹⁶ Isaiah 58:8.

¹⁷ Isaiah 58:1.