

From Tzedakah to Tzedek
Rosh HaShanah 5778 – Morning Day 2
Rabbi Greg Weisman – Temple Beth El of Boca Raton

A few weeks ago I was invited to a meeting with our acting US Attorney, a round-table conversation for faith leaders to discuss issues of hate in our community. Around the table were rabbis, pastors, imams, a nun, but the majority of those present were representing the African-American community. What I anticipated, walking into the meeting, was concern about the events of Charlottesville and some insight from our federal officials on what might be happening in here in Florida. Working against hate speech and hate crimes is something that I presumed we and the African-American community have in common. Much to my surprise, it seemed like those issues were nowhere near to the top of the concerns of those sitting across from me. One pastor shared his concern that young women in his congregation are falling victim to human trafficking. Another spoke of his elderly population's declining medical condition and access to health care. A member of the Palm Beach County School Board shared her concern for her adult son's safety when interacting with local law enforcement. These were our neighbors raising their concerns, both to the US Attorney and to us.

There is no question that we have significant challenges facing our community. Access to health care, human trafficking, and the relationship between law enforcement and the citizenry are three issues that affect our community today and most likely will continue to do so. As I sat and listened to their concerns, hearing the pain and the anxiety in their voices, I had to take a moment to take stock of where I sat among the other faith leaders, and of how blessed I am that these concerns are not what keep me up at night. We sit in a place of privilege. While our Sisterhood has engaged in learning about human trafficking, our community does not worry that our daughters and granddaughters will be taken as sexual slaves. While they worry about their adult children interacting with police, our Early Learning Center parents have asked for a larger and stronger law enforcement presence on the campus, and we have spent the last two days observing Rosh HaShanah thanks in part to the safety that the Boca Raton Police and Palm Beach County Sheriff provide us; for which we are grateful. The problems that our African-American neighbors raised

are not, on their face, our problems. But does that mean that we don't need to do something about it?

Doesn't our concern for our community and our neighbors prompt us to wonder, what can we do to help?

Many of us benefit from socio-economic privilege, living a comfortable lifestyle in a desirable coastal community. Many of us benefit from ethnic and racial privilege, where the color of our skin is not something we need to consider as we make our way through the world. As Jews living in 2017, we benefit from historical privilege. We certainly are better off than most of our ancestors of a few generations ago, who lived in fear of totalitarian regimes, rabid anti-Semitic communities, and direct threat to life and limb from pogroms or Nazi death squads. Personally, I am grateful for what my time and place of birth have given me, even as I struggle to recognize and remember that blessing on a regular basis. We, as 21st Century American Jews, have made it out of Egypt all over again. Our tradition teaches us that after our redemption, we took our memory of the oppression in Egypt and made it our mission to end oppression in the world. So we say each year at the Pesach *seder*. Having been once again redeemed by the Enlightenment, the US Constitution and its separation of religion and state, by the existence a national homeland in the State of Israel, we again find ourselves in a place where we have the opportunity and capability to help others find their way out of their own Egypt. And so we must.

Several years ago, our Temple's Social Action Committee made the decision to suspend our annual Mitzvah Day. Mitzvah Day was a single day of impactful acts of tzedakah, both at the synagogue and around the community. It was a day when we came together to fulfill one of our most important tasks- helping those less fortunate- and deepen our communal connection with each other. But for all of the good that it brought, Mitzvah Day was also limiting. What about the rest of the year? Someone asked. What if I am not available that day? So the Committee came up with the idea of the Mitzvah of the Month program. By spreading our efforts out throughout the year, we could increase the number of projects we could do, we could attract a larger group of people to participate, and most importantly, we could demonstrate that the

need for tzedakah exists not just on one day, but throughout the year. If you haven't already, you can take one of the food collection bags as you leave today, to bring back at Yom Kippur; that is our Mitzvah of the Month for September. And as our High Holy Days conclude in a few weeks, there will be projects in October, November, and throughout the year through which we can engage in acts of tzedakah, of helping those in need.

But today I suggest that the time for another evolution has come. It is time for our congregation to expand our work beyond tzedakah, beyond the righteousness of giving of our resources to those who are in need, and move towards tzedek, towards the pursuit of justice for everyone in our community. That pursuit will mean asking questions like, What can we do for our neighbors who have needs, not just to meet those needs but to prevent them from arising in the first place? It will mean us reaching out to community partners to help effectuate meaningful change at the local, state, and national level. It will mean sticking our necks out for others, and there may not be a readily apparent benefit for ourselves.

We have been building toward this for fifty years. When Temple Beth El was first founded, the small number of Jews who lived here did so quietly, and with the help of a few righteous neighbors we were able to get our feet under us. We owe that Moravian Church a debt of gratitude. From those humble beginnings we have grown into one of the nation's largest synagogues, a respected member of the faith community of Palm Beach County, and when we want to be, a leader on the path for good. We have among our membership talented people with great ideas and inspiring convictions. We have amassed power and influence in our community, which we can wield with great ability. Throughout these decades we have committed ourselves to tzedakah, creating meaningful and impacting opportunities like the Giving Tree and its spinoff Sweet Dream Makers, the many projects with the Wayne Barton Study Center and the Pearl City community. We are supportive of important causes like Light the Night and the Walk for Life, and more recently have challenged ourselves with new undertakings like Habitat for Humanity and our gleaning

work, where we harvest fresh produce that has been donated to local food banks. But we still be there could raise funds, collect holiday presents, and harvest peppers until our fingers bleed and the need would continue unabated. After many decades of helping those who are in need, it's time we wonder whether we can alleviate the need in the first place. It's time we use our energies to enact change for the good. Our goal should be to render the Giving Tree, gleanings, and Habitat for Humanity outdated and unnecessary, having solved poverty, hunger, and homelessness with our passion and our love.

That is a lofty goal. As lofty as the language of our Prophets and the heroes of our tradition. As lofty as the righteousness of Abraham, who dared to argue with God for the righteous of Sodom and Gomorrah. As lofty as Isaiah, who challenged us to be a light unto the nations and to those who sit in darkness;¹ to do good, devote [ourselves] to justice; to aid the wronged; to uphold the rights of the orphan; and to defend the cause of the widow.² As lofty as Micah, who invited us to do justice and to love goodness, that we might walk modestly God.³ These verses form the refrain of the Jewish social justice warrior. Isaiah and Micah lived at a time when corruption and malfeasance ran rampant at the highest levels of the society. Knowing the foundational principles of our Torah, to love our neighbor and love the stranger, they called out to their peers these most basic of principles: justice, care for the vulnerable, and seeking the good for all, not just ourselves. As my teacher Rabbi Sid Schwarz wrote, "Judaism calls upon Jews to stand up for what right and to act with moral courage in world that desperately needs it. That call, dating back to Abraham, is for the Jewish people to provide prophetic witness in a broken world that is in desperate need of repair. All the rest," he says, "is commentary."

It is great that for the last 50 years we have been devoted to feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and housing the wanderer. We continue to climb that mountain, proud of our accomplishment, but with our

¹ Isaiah 42:6-7

² Isaiah 1:17

³ Micah 6:8

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sights set on the next peak. The leadership of the synagogue, the board and the clergy, have recognized that we can be an even greater source for good in our community than we have already been. With our commitment to social action and tzedakah continuing, it is time to consider how we can support the pursuit of tzedek, of justice, for us and for our neighbors. We are asking the question, what can Temple Beth El and its members do to make greater Boca Raton, the State of Florida, the United States, and ultimately our world better in a lasting and meaningful way? To complete our mission and demonstrate a passionate commitment to community, we must do so. To realize our vision and share a love and responsibility for each other, our community and country, we have no choice.

The change can come in ways big and small. It might be in the way we behave and ask others to behave to help stem the tide of sea level rise. It might be in using our collective voice to petition our elected officials to enact new policies to deepen our commitment to liberty and justice for all. It might be by partnering with other communities who are like-minded and feel similarly obligated. It might be helping to find outlets for you, our members, to act upon your own vision for a better world, and to create alliances with local organizations helping to raise children from challenging backgrounds with the tools they need to be successful as adults, breaking the cycle of poverty that afflicts so many. It probably will include a little bit of all of these. Beginning with a small task force, and ultimately expanding to activism and advocacy, we will strive to make our world fundamentally better and more just. Might this lead us into issues of contemporary debate that some might consider political? Possibly. So it was when we partnered with the ADL in support of marriage equality, just as the US Supreme Court declared it a protected right. But the moral compass that our tradition provides us, and the obligation to speak out for those who were vulnerable emboldened us to speak out for what we knew to be right. It is from a place informed by tradition and with the courage of our convictions that this Temple ought to act.

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Our tradition challenges us to engage deeply with the issues of our day and using our best wisdom and our best moral compass find the answer for ourselves. That was true 2000 years ago, and remains true today.

Answers to the questions facing us in 2017 will not jump off a page of Talmud or come out of the words of a prophet. The Talmud does not tell us what we should do about DACA and the DREAMers; nowhere in the midrashim does it say how to limit the rise of our oceans. What those texts do tell us, though, is what our values are, like dignity and equality for all. Like responsibility for taking care of the earth and its natural resources. Like pursuing peace in our homes and in our communities. We must decide how best to fulfill those values. We must decide how to navigate when those values conflict, as they often do.

The job of the synagogue is to bring people together in pursuit of fulfilling the teachings of our tradition. It is why we gather on Rosh HaShanah- to observe our holidays and festivals. It is why we have a preschool and a religious school, a high school program and adult learning opportunities, to fill the mitzvah of Talmud Torah, the study of our tradition. It is why we are so committed to tzedakah, and visiting the sick, and consoling the mourner. When it comes to pursuing justice, the collective wisdom, resource, influence, and opportunity that our 1580 family synagogue has will allow us to do more than all of us could do individually. When the book of Deuteronomy says Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof; justice, justice you shall pursue, we can do it alone or we can do it together. Many have wondered why the word tzedek, justice, appears twice in a row. Perhaps is to teach us of the power of the multitude and to guide us to band together.

Personally, I am incredibly excited about this. For the last several years, as I have served the Social Action Committee, I have been inspired by so many of our members' commitment to making the world a better place. I have loved getting down in the dirt gleaning with you, walking with you to raise important funds for medical research, building homes and bringing smiles to children's faces on Christmas Eve. And through all of that I have felt the pang of wanting to do more. More and more people are feeling that way. Some of that has to do with our current political climate, but for many of us this desire has been burning since long

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before Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were candidates for the presidency. For me it has been burning for the four years I have been here. It burns even hotter when I hear my colleagues fear for their children's safety and security, knowing that trafficking and violence keeps them up at night. For our congregation it is the outgrowth of fifty years of meaningful work in our community. And for our tradition, it is the continuation of a 3000 year chain of tradition. Let us pick up the mantle, add a new link to that chain, and together make this world all that it can be. As the sound of the shofar stirs us from our slumber, let us call upon us to fulfill the words of Amos, "Let justice well up like water, righteousness like a mighty stream."