

I have a good friend named Michael. Michael is in his mid-40s, works for a national assisted living facility company. He and his wife Corie are from the same town as I am. They live in Orange County, California with their two daughters who are 7 and 5. And for the last five years, Michael has been battling brain cancer.

In the summer of 2012, while travelling for work, Michael had a headache so bad he went to the hospital. The test showed a glioblastoma. He had surgery and recovered, and started a treatment regimen of radiation and chemotherapy. But in 2012, when he was diagnosed, the 5 year survival rate for glioblastoma was only about 5%.

Michael and Corie were devastated. So were my wife Tami and I. These good friends of ours, the parents of two little kids, just had their life rocked to its core. For five years he has undergone clinical trials, treatments, the joys of a clean MRI and the devastating, my stomach is eating me from the inside, feeling of recurrence. Thank God, five years later Michael is alive and doing fairly well. He still works part time. Corie, who also is a rabbi, is working as well. Their girls are in school. But with every trip to the doctor, every monthly test, they know that their lives could take a dramatic turn.

About a year after his diagnosis, my family and I moved here from California. When we used to see them every few weeks, now we see them a couple of times a year. Our four daughters play together and look forward to their semi-annual reunions. Michael has access to some of the top cancer specialists in the country. He has a great support system of family and friends. An employer who has gone above and beyond to make his life as manageable and meaningful as possible. But despite all of the silver linings that can be drawn, this awful, terrible, painful cloud of cancer sits over my friend...and there is nothing I can really do about it. No matter how much I want to, and no matter what I do, I cannot make his cancer go away.

Yes, we call and text to check in with them after doctor's visits. Yes, we always make time to see them when we are in California. Yes, we make modest but meaningful donations to their drives for research funding. But if I am honest with myself, that doesn't do that much...and it certainly is not going to get rid of his cancer. I don't have the funds to find a cure for cancer, and many of today's cancer patients wouldn't have enough time even if every dollar was found. We love them, but I would promise never to see them again if that meant he could be healthy.

When I call, I never know exactly what to say. Part of me wants to call every day, and another part is afraid of overwhelming them. Part of me feels guilty that I am healthy and he is not. Part of me is afraid of getting closer to him, for fear of the emotional impact of losing him, not to mention the devastation of his wife and daughters. All of this can be paralyzing. It makes me feel so small, so insignificant, when all I want to do is use the fullness of my being to help make him better.

Michael's story is a personal one for me, but the feeling of helplessness I feel towards him is not unique.

Our world is broken. There are so many things that need to be fixed, and a part of me knows that there is not much more than I can do. Part of me wonders how I can ever be happy, ever rest comfortably, knowing that my friend, his wife and kids, and their family is in such pain; when so many families are in pain around the world. If one of our foundational instructions from God is to do tikkun olam, to repair the brokenness in the world, how do we deal with the emotional toll of knowing that in our lifetimes it almost certainly will not be done?

As a community we have recently experienced this. In the past month as Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and now Maria have brought devastation to Houston, to the islands of the Caribbean, and to parts of our own state of Florida, millions of dollars and truckfuls of supplies have been collected to help with the recovery. Many in our congregation have responded by bringing supplies or making financial contributions to the relief efforts.

For those who have not yet, do not feel bad- you still can. The recovery from natural disasters like major hurricanes is measured in years, not days, and the needs will continue for quite some time. But even if everyone here tonight were to empty our pockets into a tzedakah box, and bring all of the extra water, non-perishables, and toiletries we have in our homes to a collection site, there would still be the need for so much more.

It is incredibly challenging. Feeling that the need is greater than what we can offer, wanting to be able to offer more, and knowing that we have done all that we can is a stressful, maddening, empty place to be. It strikes us when we see images of suffering children on the television, when we hear of the breadth of devastation that natural disasters bring. It pains us when we learn of ethnic cleansing in Myanmar and deadly flooding in India. It is amplified when we wake up to the news of the major earthquake that just struck Mexico City.

So what do we do? How do we heal our psyches and help ourselves get through that moment of feeling helpless? There is a famous teaching in our tradition which I believe can help us frame our response. In Pirkei Avot we are given the words of Rabbi Tarfon, who used to say:

You are not obligated to complete the work, nor are you free to abandon it. This text is often cited and is

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אֶתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה

one of my favorites; an artist's representation of it hangs on the wall of my office. In just a few words, Rabbi Tarfon puts his finger on two potential emotional reactions to a task that is seemingly too big for us to do. One is to forgive ourselves for not being able to completely solve the problem. The other is to commit to doing what we can, in spite of the enormity of the challenge.

The issues facing us as we enter the New Year are significant. Sea level rise. Economic and racial inequality. The aftermath of natural disasters. No one of us can solve those problems alone, and they very well may not

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be solved in our lifetimes. And so we must excuse and forgive ourselves. When Moses received the Torah at Sinai, God told us “Lo Ba’shamayim Hi,” It is not in the heavens, so high up that no one could go and reach it. We can only do what we can do. If after some time of reflection and repentance, we can look in the mirror and say to ourselves, “I am proud of what I was able to do. I know that there is more, and I will try harder next year, but I did good,” then God forgives us for those things we are unable to accomplish, and so we must forgive ourselves.

As we do during the High Holy Days, we ask for forgiveness and we do t’shuva, repentance. So if we are asking (and granting) forgiveness of ourselves for not being able to do more, how do we also do t’shuva? Part of t’shuva, in our tradition, is seeking ways to fix our shortcomings. In this case, we can look for ways to sublimate, to scratch the itch of our desire to help those who we cannot help by helping those who we can.

When we see pictures of the devastation in Houston and in Barbuda, in Puerto Rico and in Mexico City, we can only imagine what the needs are. They begin at the most basic: food and water. Shelter. Health. Yes, we can work out international aid organizations to support their efforts to bring those most basic necessities to those in need. Most likely, the best way to do that is to make a donation. They have their infrastructure and processes in place, they have the people on the ground to know what is needed where and how to get it there. Writing a check often is the best way to help. But it doesn’t give us the same emotional satisfaction of getting our hands dirty and really addressing the problems. So we can sublimate. Food and water. Housing. Health and safety. These are the exact same concerns that our temple has worked so hard to address in our own community for the fifty years of our existence, and our Social Action Committee continues to seek out new avenues to explore.

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We may not be able to bring food and water to the residents of Antigua, but we can participate in the gleaning project, where volunteers collect unharvested produce for delivery to local food banks. Those food banks are usually well-stocked with canned fruits and vegetables and non-perishables; fresh produce can be an unexpected luxury. And speaking of supplying the food banks, let's not forget our annual food drive; take your bag home this Rosh HaShanah and bring it back full of canned goods on Yom Kippur.

We might not be able to provide beds and household items for the residents of Houston whose homes were flooded out, but the Giving Tree and its spinoff Sweet Dream Makers help to provide those items to those in our community who are in need. We can donate or volunteer with them to help bring those essential items to someone in our own back yard.

We might not be able to heal the pain of the Jewish residents of Charlottesville, who were stricken with terror just a few weeks ago. But we were able to embrace with warmth Boca Raton's Jews, Christians, and Muslims who stood together in solidarity at a candlelight vigil, illuminating the night with goodness and love, declaring that our community will not stand for hatred or bigotry.

I cannot always be there for my friend Michael as he fights his cancer, but as a community we can visit or call those who have been ill, as our Bikkur Cholim, Homebound Visitation, and Caring Committee volunteers do on a regular basis. Each of us have the opportunity to call a friend who is dealing with illness or infirmity, and share a moment of uplifting compassion.

When faced with a tragedy, when confronted with a need, our job is to do what we can. For some, who have great resource, they can do a lot of good. For most of us, our time and resources are limited. Perhaps we can only make a small contribution. But that \$5 will still put food in someone's belly or clothes on her back. Most people cannot travel to a disaster site to help with cleanup. But we can volunteer our time

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helping to pack, tape, or load boxes with supplies in our own community. And we can prepare ourselves for the next time.

As Hurricane Irma set her sights on south Florida, the thoughts of many in our community turned to those of us for whom evacuating or taking shelter might be challenge. Our temple leadership wondered what we could do for those who are in assisted living, who no longer drive, or who don't have the financial wherewithal to uproot themselves for an undetermined period of time. But in the days before Irma's arrival, we realized that we did not have the infrastructure in place to quickly mobilize, to safely and efficiently provide shelter in homes with impact protection and generators to those who might wish to seek better shelter. The desire to help was there, but we simply weren't ready. As our president, Mark Sunshine, mentioned a few moments ago, we have to rethink that. As part of the temple's t'shuva, we are going to explore how we can do better in the future.

As we begin this new year together, I am filled with feelings of sadness and feelings of excitement. I am saddened by the anguish that I see around us. I am saddened by my own limitations. But as I look around this congregation tonight, and think about all of the people with whom we will be celebration Rosh HaShanah this year, my spirits are lifted by knowing how many good people have and will do so many good things for others. Let us resolve in 5778 to do those things that we can do for others. Let us resolve to forgive ourselves for not doing those things that are out of reach. And let us resolve to support and love each other in the process.

Shana tova u'metukah.