



Rosh Hashanah 5776: Who Do You Want to Be This Year?

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“I remember one day,” writes Will Schwabe, in *The End of Your Life Book Club*, “when Mom’s endless commitments finally got the better of her.”

My brother, my sister, and I were sitting in the kitchen in our Cambridge house. I was eating cereal and worrying about the school day. Doug and Nina were probably chatting with or annoying each other. There were just a few moments before we needed to sling on our coats and head out into the cold. Mom came down the stairs, looking a bit harried, which was unusual. There was something that I wanted to tell her, and I tried to catch her eye.

I watched her go to the tap for a glass of water. Surrey, our English setter, lay on the floor. Mom had a pill in one hand, which she shoved into a little ball of hamburger that she’d fetched from the refrigerator, and then put into Surrey’s mouth, massaging her neck so that she would swallow it. Then Mom washed her hands, took another pill, and swallowed that.

Finally I was able to catch her eye. Now I could tell her the thing I really wanted to tell her. But before I could speak, Mom’s eyes grew wide, and she said a word I’d never heard her say, followed by “I just took a worming pill and gave the dog my birth control.”¹

Some days, simply not having that kind of a morning can be counted as a success.

But some days, we aspire to more. I was on a rare excursion to a mall at some point this summer, and I was stopped in my tracks by a big sign with the words, “Who do you want to be this year?” Now, granted, it was an ad for clothing, trying to convince teenage girls that the clothes they buy will determine who they are. If I may quote from the Fairview Cadillac Corporation, “the outfit you wear can set

¹ Will Schwabe, *The End of Your Life Book Club*, p.77.



the tone for the entire year.”² It’s not really my kind of message – but the question seemed exactly right. Who do you want to be this year?

Now, two thousand years ago, a sage named Hillel reflected on a similar question. He probably was not so concerned with what he was going to wear for his first day of yeshiva – though there’s a story about how he almost froze to death lying on the roof of the house of study in a snowstorm so he could listen in, so at the very least he needed a new winter coat. Hillel as the model for Canada Goose – I can almost see it now. But here is what Hillel asked:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

But if I am only for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?

Let’s take it one question at a time.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? *Im ayn ani li, mi li?*

Six short words in the Hebrew, impossible to forget. This question, in many ways, is our default position in the Jewish community. We stand up for each other and take care of our own, because all too many times, the world has not been a friendly place. Just from this past year, I think of the continued rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, the prevalence of the BDS movement to boycott Israel and the hostility Jews on campus often face, the deep-seated fears about making a deal with Iran, whose leaders call constantly for Israel’s destruction. I think of how the Jewish American musician Matisyahu was disinvited from a music festival in Spain simply because he wouldn’t sign a political statement about a Palestinian state. Much though I hate to acknowledge it, there are very old hatreds here.

But I was struck by a recent column by McGill historian Gil Troy. Troy recounts the story of his own narrow escape from tragedy mountain climbing this past summer, and then relates the saga of his father-in-law, who survived the

² <http://archive.newswire.ca/fr/story/1576003/back-to-school-shopping-who-will-you-be-this-year>.



Holocaust and was in Tel Aviv in 1948 when Israel was founded. Troy acknowledges the power of survival. And then, he writes:

For too long, the Jewish community has been too satisfied with mere survival. Far more Jewish students enroll in Holocaust classes than classes about Judaism or Zionism, just as fighting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) boycotters trumps articulating an inspiring Zionist vision for the 21st century...

This year, in Israel and throughout the rest of the Jewish world, let's focus on thriving, not just surviving, individually and collectively. Instead of being what the Jewish historian Simon Rawidowicz called the Ever-Dying People, we should be the Brilliantly-Living People. Let's work on enhancing our Jewish journeys, on finding meaning through Judaism and Zionism, on deepening our connection to Israel, and on doing it with zest, and with joy...

Troy's words reminded me of the people who we encountered in Israel, on our Temple trip in the spring. Shira Reifman, whose work with adults with special needs at Kibbutz Kishorit is awe-inspiring, from the organic vegetable gardens that we helped harvest, to the award-winning puppies that they raise. Noam Rumack, our guide, who was passionate about environmentalism and the beauty of the land. These are people – Shira who came from a life in New Jersey, and Noam the child of Canadians who made aliyah – whose lives in Israel are not merely about surviving. These are people who are thriving, who get up every day to create a better country and build a better world.

So we can't stop at Hillel's first line. We have to go on.

V'im ani ruk l'atzmi, ma ani? But if I am only for myself, what am I?

Notice: not who, but what. If we care only about ourselves, if we are the sole subjects of our concern, then we diminish our own humanity. Joseph Telushkin, in his masterful biography of Hillel, tells of a time when someone wrote him for advice, saying he gives all his charity to Jewish causes, because, "after all, if Jews



don't support Jewish charitable needs, who will?" Telushkin responds that the questioner should indeed help support Jewish causes, but he goes on to say:

Don't give all your donations to your own community. It's not good for your character. If you do that long enough, you'll stop seeing everyone as being equally created in God's image and therefore worthy of your help. We are, after all, all members of one race, the human race.³

As part of our Israel trip, we went to Yad Vashem. I saw it with different eyes this time, since my older daughter learned about the Holocaust in school this year. She, like me as a child, wondered what her fate would have been had she lived in those dark times. But standing in the garden of the righteous at Yad Vashem, and hearing some of the stories of non-Jews who saved Jewish lives, I asked myself another question: how would I have acted had I not been a Jew? Would I have had the courage to help?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

Frank Nash, may his memory be for blessing, was a member of this congregation for many years. Born in Slovakia in 1914, his family was dispersed when the country was overrun. He ended up spending six months on a Greek steamboat trying to get out of Europe; it was a boat full of Jews looking for somewhere that would let them in. People gave birth on that ship and they died on that ship. Frank couldn't swim, so when they came near what was then Palestine, he couldn't join the others who swam for shore. Eventually, the Irgun snuck them in. But he took that experience with him that whole life; what it was to be on that boat, desperate to live. His brother survived by going to Ecuador; his sister survived by going through Shanghai. But the three of them were the only ones from their family to emerge from the war. Frank Nash ended up in Montreal, opening a restaurant – "The Little Vienna" – on Stanley and what was then Burnside, now de Maisonneuve. He joined Temple, looking for social and professional networks at least as much as a spiritual home. But when there was

³ Joseph Telushkin, *Hillel: If Not Now, When?* p.167.



an exodus of Vietnamese people escaping on boats and looking for safe haven, it was Frank Nash who organized this congregation to sponsor two Vietnamese families in 1979.⁴

David Cohen has been a member of our congregation for twenty years. His grandfather came to Canada at the turn of the century, fleeing pogroms in Poland. He brought his family but had to leave his sister behind; one of her legs was shorter than the other, and she couldn't pass the check-up to get papers. As the clouds of war gathered in Europe, she managed to get a visa to England in 1938 for one year. Her brother did everything he could to bring her to Canada, visiting Ottawa, following all the proper channels. As we know, though, in those days, none was too many. So when her visa expired, she was sent back to Poland, and in Poland, she was killed. David learned from his father not to look the other way, to do everything in one's power to act – and in turn, he taught that message to his children. And so it was that they came to me a few weeks ago, and asked if Temple would consider sponsoring a family of Syrian refugees.

Kerry McKenna recently came to our congregation with her husband, to affirm the Judaism of their children and find a synagogue home. Recently, I received the following message from her:

This summer my family had the good fortune to spend a few weeks in Turkey and Greece on holiday. In Greece we were on the island of Kalymnos, about a twenty minute ferry ride from the larger island of Kos where the lion's share of Syrian refugees are landing. We hear about it daily on the news- *the refugee crisis*. I realize now that I had unknowingly created a special category of people in my mind *refugees*. These fantasies that we all create in our minds to buffer ourselves from all the unimaginable tragedy that happens daily become much more difficult to keep up when it's right in your face. While we had adventures and swam in the sea and created memories other families, Syrian families, sat in sun

⁴ My thanks to Grace Zell for doing the archival research which turned up this part of our history, and to Joanie Nash, Frank's daughter, who shared his story with me.



around the port and waited desperately. The stress and hopelessness and precariousness of their situation so apparent on the faces of parents who so desperately tried to keep their children safe and fed and entertained.

One afternoon I was in the port with my two oldest daughters (age 6 & 7) and I bought them each an ice cream sandwich. They weren't paying much attention to a Syrian family, who like ours had three young kids, huddled together in shade of a nearby building. We had seen hundreds of families just like them in the three weeks we were in Turkey and Greece. In that moment we all had the same reaction- the unbearable awkwardness that accompanies being face to face with the inequity that exists in the world, the uncomfortable feeling of acknowledging your own privilege. When my girls opened their ice cream packets they realized that each packet contained four little ice cream sandwiches. For a moment they were thrilled at their good fortune. But then one of the Syrian girls, she must have been about 3, caught my oldest daughter's eye and she said to her sister *why don't we just share one of the packages?* In the same breath she handed her package over to the little girl who was watching. I was proud of course, but I'm not sharing this story to illustrate how great my kids are – they're just kids. I'm sharing this story because it illustrates so simply something that we all know from the time we are very little, and something that is so obvious when a real live human is standing in front of you; when you have more than enough of something and someone else has none you share.

The refugee crisis is not being resolved; if anything it's picking up steam. The photo today of two little boys who drowned on the crossing to Kos and washed up on the beach in Bodrum are almost too much to bear. As a parent I know you only put your kids on a rickety boat in the middle of the night because you think you it's your best chance; because you think it's safer than the ground you left.⁵

⁵ Email, Sept. 2, 2015, shared with permission.



I for one cannot say “who by fire, who by water” in the Unetaneh Tokef this year without seeing Alan Kurdi. I cannot say those words and know that we could have saved someone from drowning in the Aegean Sea and did nothing. Rabbi Asher Lopatin writes that the Unetaneh Tokef, so often understood to show that everything is in God’s hands and nothing is in our own, actually has the opposite meaning. “The God of *Un’taneh Tokef*,” he writes, “has spent the last year stepping back from the world in order to let human beings act independently, and these actions become the book of the world, signed by the people responsible for them...”

We determine, ultimately, if there is peace on earth, if people are safe from rapacious fires and floods, and if they are safe from the ravages of economic cycles. We determine who is respected and who is not – champions of morality or of spiritual success – and the models, therefore, that future generations will emulate. Especially in the face of trauma, we humans must reclaim our will and determine whether we are at the end of our rope or if we have the inner strength to do more mitzvot in the world.⁶

He quotes Moses Isserles as saying that when someone dies, we are forbidden to respond, “what can you do?” because we are always meant to do what we can.

So we come to Hillel’s last question: *im lo achshav, eimatai?* If not now, when?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in explaining why he got involved in the peace movement, tells this story from when he was seven years old, encountering the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac – the story we read on Rosh Hashanah:

My heart began to beat even faster; it actually sobbed for pity for Isaac. Behold, Abraham now lifted the knife. And now my heart froze within me with fright. Suddenly, the voice of the angel was heard: ‘Abraham, lay not your hand upon the lad, for now I know you fear God.’ And here I broke out in tears and wept aloud. ‘Why are you crying?’ asked the rabbi. ‘You know

⁶ Asher Lopatin, “Empowering Human Beings to Challenge Fate,” in *Who By Fire, Who By Water* (ed. Larry Hoffman), pp.157-58.



that Isaac was not killed.’ And I said to him, still weeping, ‘But, Rabbi, supposing the angel had come a second too late?’ The rabbi comforted me and calmed me by telling me that an angel cannot come late.

An angel cannot be late, but man, made of flesh and blood, may be.⁷

If not now, when?

In her message, Kerry asked me the same question that David Cohen asked, and the same question that Frank Nash asked and answered all those years ago. She asked: “do you think the congregation may be able to do something?”

I am proud to tell you, this Rosh Hashanah morning, that the answer to that question is yes. With your help, we will undertake to sponsor at least one refugee family. We already have a working group and the support of the board, and you can call us to offer help or money starting Wednesday morning; we can take donations on the website as well. Our first open meeting will be in just under a month, on Wednesday, October 13th.

This will not be a small project. We will be responsible not only for raising enough money to show the Canadian government that we can support a family for a year; we will also be responsible for everything from meeting them at the airport to finding them a place to live, from helping them learn French to helping them find work and schools. We will be responsible long after their images and stories have disappeared from the headlines of our news. But we will stand together with other synagogues and churches across this country who are living their values and stepping forward to do what they can. To quote Marie Anne Schwabe, she of the deworming medicine and birth-control episode at the beginning of this sermon, a woman who in addition to running a household spent her life helping people around the globe: “Of course you could do more... [but] there’s never a good excuse for not doing anything.”⁸ Or as Olivia Cohen, David’s daughter, said: “everyone in their lifetime looks to make a difference.” And if not now, when?

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “A Prayer for Peace,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p.232.

⁸ Schwabe, p.255.



For too long, we have thought of religion in passive terms. We count our health by how many people are sitting in the pews, and we encourage engagement via the payment of dues. All this is necessary but not sufficient. I want us to show our health by how many lives we change, how many people we help, how many hearts we touch - both inside and outside this room. I want us to show our health by thriving, not merely surviving.

That's who I want us to be this year. I hope you will help me.