

10/07/11
Elissa Froman

Growing up, the voices from Jewish tradition that most spoke to me were those of the Prophets. They told us that as Jews, we must: do justly, love mercy and walk humbly; let Justice flow like a mighty stream; and as many congregations read today, cast off the yolk of oppression. To me, their words were a call to construct safe, ethical and strong communities - a call to each of us to live a life of responsible action.

I've found that the high holidays help me refocus on this sense of responsibility and purpose. The opportunity to do Tshuvah, to return to our core values and acknowledge the cyclical nature of the year and of our lives, helps remind me that in order to effectively solve the most contemporary social and political problems, wisdom must be sought from the unending well of ancient Jewish inspiration. I have the great privilege of trying to manifest those values in my professional life, working for the National Council of Jewish Women, where I get to organize and advocate for civil rights legislation. In this work at the intersection between the Jewish and progressive policy community, I have the opportunity to recall and identify cycles from our collective past that have re-emerged today. To speak out against the scapegoating of the immigrant community because we know where inflammatory language and misplaced blame can lead. To stand up against a legal system that denies thousands of rights to people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, because we know the consequences of legally codified second class citizenship. To draw on the collective cultural, traditional and historical memory of Judaism and challenge the increasing toxicity in the national conversation.

I'm fortunate to have had this sense of purpose early on in my life and career. But in viewing the question of what my work is in this world, through the lens of this last year specifically, I find myself hearing another voice: the voice of Rabbi Hillel who famously taught that the most important commandment in our tradition is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. If the voices of the Prophets remind me of my responsibility to my community, than the increasingly resonant voice of Hillel, echoed by modern community organizing principles, reminds me that all change stems from a single interaction between two people. This year I was lucky to be given insight into the enormous power of such an interaction.

Almost five months ago, after five years of various failed cancer treatments, I was the recipient of a bone marrow transplant. My donor, who it took many months to find, was an anonymous 21-year old male in Israel. I know nothing about him beyond those few facts, and that I think that he's probably allergic to kiwi because now I am too.

He's never met me, nor I him. But he willingly waited months while I finished final rounds of chemotherapy and radiation to prepare for the transplant, and when they gave him a three week window for donation to accommodate his schedule, he was ready to donate on day one. His kindness is immeasurable, his generosity indescribable - I exist today only because he does. This experience brought with it a shift in my understanding of what my avodah, my work and service, means in this world.

When I consider how often I was impatient with a colleague, shoved past a tourist on the metro, was short with a family member, or not responsive to a friend with a need large or small, I know that I have often failed to live up to this central commandment. This year, I want to commit to working not only against the cycles of oppression and hate in our society at-large, but also those destructive cycles in my own life which my actions contribute to, knowingly or not. This year, I want to strive to make my interactions more intentional, meaningful and generous. This year, I want to draw on the lessons of Jewish tradition in order to embrace the sacred responsibility we are reminded of today: because for transgressions against one another, Yom Kippur does not atone: our actions must speak for us.

I was given not only a life-saving gift this year, but a life-affirming gift: a reminder that giving to another can come without condition; without expectation of gratitude or reward, with nothing behind it but the purity of love for a fellow human being simply because they're a fellow human being. My work in the world, this year and for all my years to come is to be worthy of the gift I received by listening to all those voices of Jewish inspiration from the past, in order to make the world - the one that we all share, and the one that exists in each connection between two people - a better place.

Shanah Tovah and G'mar Hatimah Tovah