

Rosh Hashana 5773  
 Transformational Judaism  
 Rabbi Rachel Joseph

Since I'm new, I get to ask a lot of questions. I learn about people through questions and hearing people's story. Over the past few months, I've asked many of you, "Why are you a part of Congregation Beth Israel?" There's a core set of responses that won't surprise you: "For the religious school," "the clergy," "community," "music." All good reasons. All true reasons. No one has ever said: "You know, I wanted to practice a different way of living that would help bring about a world filled with justice and peace."

Now, I imagine, since I've mentioned it aloud, some of you would say, "Yes. Also that." But, I've noticed, we tend **not** to articulate **that** as the reason why we're here. And yet, we **DO** want to practice a different way of living. I know this because you tell me all the time. And because our sanctuary would be empty if people were doing just fine.

We're in search of a different way to live, and we have a sense, maybe only a vague, distant, far-away sense, that we might learn it from our Temple. We might taste it on Shabbat, we might feel it on Mitzvah Day, or the opening day of Religious School. Moments where we sense something different in the air, sense that there IS a different way to live – but in the meantime, we've settled: we've settled for barely keeping our heads above water with our pace of life. We've settled for superficial interactions and conversations with friends and loved ones. We've settled for accepting a world as it is instead of how it could be. And, as a result, we use Beth Israel as a true sanctuary, a place to seek **refuge** from the **assault** of the everyday world so that we are able to get back out there with hopes of surviving another day/week/year.

On one level, this is okay because the impact of the world on each one of us can be destructive. We join a community like Beth Israel so that we can learn to live through the inevitable moments of pain, loss and uncertainty. But, what if Beth Israel were a place where we didn't just go to deal with the impact of the world on us but also where we learned how our words and actions **could have an impact on the world?**

What would it look like if Beth Israel were a place for learning the skills, along with the words and the actions that would help us to create the world we most desire? So we stop drowning in a sea of overextension -- so we stop running away from complicated conversations -- so we start feeling strong and powerful as we articulate what's possible and we begin to see it happen

This is a Big Idea but it's not a new idea. Synagogues were once at the forefront of social change. We learned and lived a **transformational** Judaism. Today, more often than not, we've settled for a **transactional** Judaism. Here's what I mean: lots of things we do at Temple **LOOK** like we're selling something – like a product. You pay us money and we provide a service: Pre-school. A bar-mitzvah. High Holy Days.

Except, we're not here to sell products. And you haven't come here to be consumers. We're here for something more. You can sense it, and so can we. It's time to reclaim our legacy. This is

about Congregation Beth Israel as a place to learn and live **transformational Judaism**. It's about people, just like you, trying to figure why you're here and why you stay.

Synagogues ARE here to answer the big questions and make sense of the world: why is the world broken? What will be our reaction? What is my role and responsibility?

Think about Shabbat services. We invite people to turn to their neighbors, to introduce themselves, and to say "Shabbat Shalom." Why do we do this? I'll tell you, it's not a time-filler while your clergy think about the next thing to say. It's a practice meant to create connections that last beyond the sanctuary. It's a ritual reminder that the people who share this space with you MATTER. Imagine if we practiced that kind of relational behavior in the carpool line or at Starbucks.

Think about the model seders we do in religious school. We teach our children to say aloud, "Let all who are hungry, come and eat." We invite them to dramatically retell our exodus from slavery to freedom. Why? Because we're giving them a lens through which they might see a world moving towards justice. A lens through which they see their hands reaching out to help others.

Think about Jewish education. Within the walls of Beth Israel, each person, regardless of his/her background, has the opportunity to weigh in on the tradition. We learn to tolerate, if not celebrate, competing opinions, complexity and paradox. Why do we do this? Why do we encourage students **AFTER** their bar/bat mitzvah to continue studying with us through Confirmation and **AFTER** Confirmation, to continue studying with us through Adulthood?!

We do it because we want to teach ourselves the skills to go out into a contradictory, inconsistent world and to listen for creative solutions -- to honor our instincts -- and to move with power and purpose towards a world filled with justice, compassion, and peace.

**We are practicing in here, who we want to be out there. Our children are better people in here so they can be better out there. We are better people in here so we can be better out there. That is transformational Judaism.**

I am reminded of a story told about the great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber. When he was young he divided his life into compartments. He spent his mornings immersed in his spiritual practice. He saw religious experience as separate from his every-day life. And then something happened that helped him recognize how dangerous this division could be.

Because of this, Buber made the commitment to **never see religious practice as separate and cut off from the rest of life**. Buber writes, "when you pray you do not remove yourself from this life of yours but in your praying refer your thought to it."

I tell this story about Martin Buber to warn us against what can happen if we see our religious practices as something other than our communal obligations to each other and our power to take action together. If we are here just to make ourselves feel good, we are missing the point! Here is where we learn how to act in the world.

## **We are practicing in here, who we want to be out there.**

What do you think is the most important verse in the Torah? Let this question sit in your mind for a second. I imagine that some of you might say, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Or it could be the Shema. Maybe others would respond, “Justice, justice shall you pursue”.

In Pirke Avot (The Sayings of our Ancestors) Rabbi Hillel asks the same question. He answers his own question with this verse: “B’tzelem Elohim bara otam,” In the image of God were they created. Surprising in its simplicity. Yet what would it mean for us to live our lives with this intention? With the knowledge that every person we meet is the image of God? How would we behave, what would we care about and how would we choose to spend our time?

According to Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, this torah verse implies that every human being is “endowed by their Creator with three intrinsic dignities: infinite value, equality and uniqueness. He further claims, “All of society – economics, politics, culture must be organized to respect and uphold these fundamental dignities.” This is a radical understanding of the Biblical verse. While the task of transforming our whole society seems overwhelming, we can make changes locally that can have an impact globally.

## **This is why as a synagogue community we are kicking off a campaign to work on issues of food justice.**

Congregation Beth Israel can have an impact locally in addressing issues of hunger. Our Oregon community is one of the **hungriest in the nation**. Too many children go without food, are unable to learn in school and fail to thrive. Too many families are food insecure. Too many of us live pay check to pay check where healthy and nutritious food is not an option.

According to new data from the USDA, 13.6 percent of Oregon households, or 491,000 Oregonians, suffer food insecurity. A household is deemed food insecure if it lacks consistent access to adequate amounts of nutritious food. About 5.9 percent of Oregon households, or more than 213,000 individuals, suffer very low food security, meaning they ate less, skipped meals and sometimes went without food for days.

What does it mean that around the world, almost a billion people are malnourished and almost a billion over consume? How can it be that there is enough food produced to feed the world’s population, yet people go hungry? Researchers have made it clear that there are systemic problems in our food chain that make it harder for some people to grow and buy enough to feed their families.

When we hear the stories of those in our midst who are food insecure, my mind echoes with the words from the Prophet Isaiah that we read on Yom Kippur – “is this the fast that I desire?” What is our responsibility? Why should God take notice of us if we move through our lives with concern only for our personal needs? As a synagogue we are commanded to care, to take action

to improve the world. One way to do this is through taking action together on behalf of ourselves and our community.

We often fail to recognize the needs of our own community. We fail to respond to the false assumption that all of us share the same economic position.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, in the last five years, the number of people with master's degrees or higher who receive food stamps and other government assistance food programs has TRIPLED. I know what it's like to walk into a public assistance office, to not be treated like the image of God. As a former recipient of benefits from the Women, Infant and Children program (WIC), I know what it's like to be treated like a case and not a human being. To feel ashamed in the grocery check-out line when one of my items was not on the approved government list. I am not the stereotype you think of when you picture a family on public assistance but I am the reality and I am here to shine a light on an unjust system.

I don't blame the case worker who has more and more families to work with while watching his own salary get slashed and program funding disappear. I don't blame the check out woman at the grocery store who has no choice but to follow the federal guidelines that determine which food is approved and which is not according to the contract negotiated between the food company and government agency.

But I do know that something has to change. With less and less money in our state budgets, with cut after cut to important social welfare programs, with more and more people facing the realities of not being able to make ends meet, WE MUST ACT. We have a responsibility to step in. This is a call to action.

We must recognize the need in our own community and we must as a synagogue make strong commitments to address this need in a more systematic way. We could do it alone but we are stronger and more powerful together.

Our praying on this day, during this time, must lead us to do *teshuvah* -- to change ourselves and our community because we have an important vision to contribute -- a vision and a language that comes out of our faith tradition. And it shouldn't be reserved for the model seder. We are not "playing" Judaism when we come to Temple. We are learning it and living it. We are impacting the world with it.

We know that something like 10 million people died of hunger last year, 10 million! What if we could do something about that? What if, this Rosh Hashanah, the day when we are judged for so many things, what if we dared ourselves to dream about a better world for those who are hungry, those who also pass before the Great Shepherd alongside us today?

Not long after this sermon we'll go home. Apples and honey and a beautiful meal await us -- as they should. And we don't need to eat less for others to eat more. But we do need to think about what roles we play -- actively and passively -- and what roles we want to play in the politics and the ethics of who has food and who doesn't. Food is such a part of our lives in so many ways.

We interact with it more than just about anything else in the world. So food should be what's on our plate -- literally and figuratively -- today. If we're here to review the year that has passed, to picture the year to come, and to dream, I hope we can think as individuals and as a community about these questions.

**We are practicing in here who we want to be out there. That is transformational Judaism.**

What are we doing? With Ilene Davidson at the helm of the social action committee, we are transforming social justice in our congregation. So many of you are involved in amazing projects in our community – from Urban Gleaners to Goose Hollow, Friday backpacks to the Christmas Dinner and so many more! We want to harness that energy and power in here. We want every person to get involved. There is so much to do. Come talk to us, because social action is not just a committee. We want social action to be the life blood of the congregation. It's time to reclaim our legacy.

This work requires partnership. **Are you ready to join us, your clergy, staff, social action committee, and congregational community in this holy endeavor?**

Here is your first opportunity to get involved. Underneath your seats and when you leave the sanctuary, you will find a grocery bag or flyer. Take it home and fill a bag with food. Bring the bag back to Temple on Yom Kippur when, as a community, we will donate this food to Lift Urban Portland, formerly NW Portland Ministries. An organization that WE – Congregation Beth Israel – help found over 30 years ago. We are reclaiming our legacy.

The end of the prophet Isaiah's message has an interesting twist. After Isaiah describes the acts of social justice God demands of us, we expect that the result of taking these actions would be an improved situation for the poor and oppressed. But instead, the prophet promises rewards to all of us. When we help others, we are all made better.

**And what about you?** When you're at New Seasons or the park or the gym or at school or at work -- are you seeing the world through the lens that you learned at Beth Israel? Are you speaking the words? Using the skills?

**Are you better out there from what you learned in here?**

*Are you living what you're learning? If not, why not?*

Why not?!? Because it's hard! I know!

I'm asking because **THIS** is the time of year when we are challenged to think about the changes we want to make and to commit to them. At this time of year, our tradition offers us some extra help to do the hard work of transformation.

**At this time of year**, we are learning a particular language; we are practicing a special set of behaviors **directing us towards** a new vision of our lives and of our world. That's called teshuvah. Literally, we are turning.

**Why are you a part of Congregation Beth Israel? More importantly, why do you stay?**

**Because there's a great Religious School**, or because you want your children to learn the skills to live life with courage and conviction?

**Because there's a lively Saturday morning Torah study**, or because your purpose in this world is made clearer through THIS type of conversation?

**Because there's a large Mitzvah Day**, or because you want your actions to reflect your values?

It's time to turn. To profoundly turn – to point ourselves in the right direction. **To practice in here who we want to be out there.**

Let this day, let this community, let this congregation transform you, and together we can transform the world.

That's transformational Judaism.

Shanah Tovah.