

Cantor Vera Broekhuysen
D'var Torah, Kol Nidrei 5782
ALEINU: it takes a village

In the height of late June's heat wave, I stood on top of the retaining wall behind my house, watering rock plants. (I watered the garden every day that week, sometimes twice a day.) My skin was scorching, and the plants were browning and droopy. As I turned the hose on the rocky soil under each plant, I could see the water absorb into the thirsty ground. The plant stems swelled a little bit before my eyes. I had a moment of flashing power, I felt Godlike: the water I was giving them was the difference between their life and their death. What I did, mattered.

This year, from mask-wearing to vaccination to careful planning of gatherings, each day of life in a world shaped by COVID-19 has reminded us that what we do, matters. Each choice has, to me, felt that it had the power to impact someone else's survival. Those kind of stakes can feel scary, even paralyzing—we spoke about this fear, last year at our High Holy Day services.

Individual choices are important in Jewish tradition. In B'reishit/Genesis chapter 18, Avraham bargains with God: If there are fifty righteous people to be found in the city of S'dom, condemned for its xenophobia, will God abandon God's plan for destruction? What about forty-five? Forty? Thirty-five? and so on, until we get down to ten. This story is one of our sources for the number that makes a minyan, the minimum quorum to say Kaddish, make the call to prayer, and repeat an Amidah out loud. I think this story asks an important question: How many righteous individuals does it take to save a community that is doing something dangerous? How do we weight the power of individual action against communal action? Who “counts”?

Judaism is also a religion of communal behaviour. “Al tifrosh min hatzibbur,” Rabbi Hillel warns us¹, “don't separate yourself from the community.” Our prayers use the language of “we.” Our holy texts of oral Torah, the Mishnah and Talmud, default to majority opinion in halachic, legal matters, even as they respectfully preserve individual dissents. Jewish tradition understands that while individuals like Moshe Rabbeinu and the prophet Devorah can model and inspire, group action drives both habit and change.

This Jewish perspective feels particularly instructive to me this year as I consider both our country's ongoing process of climbing out of the pit COVID has dug for us and the hate crimes that have plagued America in general and the Merrimack Valley in particular. And I think it's impossible this fall to consider the question of communal responsibility without talking about the US withdrawal from Kabul and the Taliban tidal wave that threatens, among so much else, to tear away opportunities for education, employment, and social freedom that Afghan women and girls have poured themselves into these past twenty years.

First, COVID. My eldest son Jonathan said one night in July at our dinner table: “I hope someday we’ll only have ten unvaccinated people. If we’re really lucky, I hope someday we’ll only have five unvaccinated people.” If all but a few of us are doing what we're supposed to, does that majority count? He learned this year, at six years old, that communal safety is created by communities acting entirely together, and that when a pandemic is in play, even a small number of people opting out can create grave risk for the rest. COVID has been a hard voice against our American ideal of individualism. This is a pandemic in which any one of us getting vaccinated and masking and distancing, doing all the right things personally, is critical. AND, our own choices are not enough to keep any one of us safe. Everyone around us ALSO needs to do all those things. It's a bitter pill to swallow.

Our need for strong, safe community norms is reinforced by the hate crimes our community has witnessed in the past months. Homophobia, racism, and antisemitism have each been given visible platforms this summer. Nashua, Haverhill, North Andover, Lowell, Winthrop, Brighton, Framingham ... the list goes on. Swastikas were used this summer in North Andover in two probably unrelated incidents—one clearly antisemitic, one a homophobic death threat. Hate is intersectional. A single person can sow fear and horror—it takes the whole village to make hate's expressions unthinkable AND to teach people not to hate in the first place. That's why we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Shabbat each year with Calvary Baptist Church. That's why the presence of interfaith friends and neighbors is so important to us each year at Yom HaSho'ah.

Community action makes healing from hate and prevention of hate possible. The vigil I led in North Andover after the swastikas was co-organized by founders of the North Andover Pride

Project. Members of our Social Action committee signed up to volunteer at Merrimack Valley Black and Brown Voices markets after their Haverhill event was targeted. I remember, the day after the New Zealand mosque massacre, a group of Temple members going to the Islamic Society of Greater Haverhill, at their request, to be present with them in prayer. We sat; we spoke; we witnessed and shared sorrow. This summer, a colleague of mine said that the safest they'd ever felt, in a time rife with antisemitism, was walking up to the door of their shul for Kol Nidrei and seeing rows of interfaith community members guarding the walkway. Not armed; trained in de-escalation. They showed up to say, “We've got your back while you pray.”

Close relationships that support human rights can be international, which begets more responsibility in places of physical danger. The public outcry over America's withdrawal from Afghanistan, leaving a shameful number of translators and fixers and their families endangered, acknowledges American responsibility towards Afghans who partnered with us in an attempt—however flawed—to help Afghans build up a more democratic and egalitarian society. The volume of protest speaks to the depth of our failure towards these people.

Giving, asking, and accepting the help of an international community to protect human rights doesn't imply impotence. Afghans were and are and must be the center of their own liberation movements. As photographer Rada Akbar says, “The history of Afghan women didn't start after 2001. We have a long and rich past to which women have always contributed.”² Afghan women have been pioneers of educational and social initiatives. Gayle Tzemach Lemmon's 2011 book, *The Dressmaker of Khair Kana*, chronicles Kamila Sidiqi and her four sisters who created a robust dressmaking business and school inside their families homes under Taliban rule in Kabul. Starting with their own household, they eventually trained and employed over 100 Afghan women who were then able to provide for their families. Kamila went on to found Kaweyan Business Development Solutions, training over 10,000 Afghan entrepreneurs, many of them women. Kamila herself became a government minister, serving first as Deputy Chief of Staff and then as Afghan Deputy Commerce Minister. My sister Lucia spent a year in Kabul, 2006–2007. She remembers women “rushing forward” into the opportunities that had opened up for them. Since the Taliban swept back to power, crowds of women have demonstrated in the streets for

their rights, despite consistent and sometimes violent Taliban opposition. Protests have been outlawed. Yet the women, some men at their side, fight on for freedom.

Kamila Sidiqi was evacuated from Afghanistan on a private plane on August 15.

We should not fall into the hubristic trap of saying that someone else's liberation depends only on ourselves. But neither should we say, having learned of oppression and grave danger to others in any situation in which we have considerable power, "That's not my problem." America's engagement with Afghanistan has shifted from military to humanitarian, but I believe we still have skin in this game. As the Gemara teaches: אֵין קְבוּשׁ מִתִּיר עֲצָמוֹ מִבֵּית הָאֲסוּרִים, a prisoner can't usually free themselves from prison.³ The plight of Americans and Afghans in mortal danger within Kabul, and those who have made it to American soil: that is our problem. Our Temple has an opportunity this fall to join with other interfaith partners and offer support to arriving Afghan refugees in the Merrimack Valley, and in the next week you'll hear from me about options for offering that support. Think about what your own capacity is, in this moment, and how you may want to respond.

Even the boldest of individuals cannot, I believe, change community action or norms on their own. I can, for instance, teach a new tune for L'cha Dodi till I'm blue in the face, but it's not our community's song until you all start singing it. We shouldn't exaggerate our own influence, AND we also must not discount our individual potential to catalyze communal change. Jewish tradition gives us strong and successful examples of both.

One famous example of an individual is Nachson ben Aminadav, who with fear and faith in his heart, steps into the waters of the Reed Sea as the Israelites flee Egypt (according to the Talmud). Only then does the miracle begin, and the people cross. Perhaps even more appropriate to our times, Yiddish author and satirist David Frishman published a story in 1912, called "Three Who Ate." A cholera epidemic ravages a country; a rabbi begs his congregation not to fast on Yom Kippur day, so as to stay alive, citing pikuach nefesh till his voice cracks. They refuse until he and the other two rabbis on the bimah eat and drink in front of them. "And all the Jews ate that day," says the narrator, "they ate and wept."⁴ Instruction and request didn't cut it; modeling was

the only successful option for leadership in that moment. There are risky times that require leading by example, rather than by consensus. But a community must be ready to say yes to the moment, and to take that action together.

To me, the most exciting model of leadership is communal AND individual, working explicitly in dialogue. This spring I spent six weeks learning part of a Talmud daf/page, Rosh HaShanah 25a, online with SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva. This daf tells a powerful story: Two witnesses come to attest that they've seen the new moon, to help fix the calendar for the year, but what they say shows clearly that they've made a mistake. Rabban Gamliel, leader of the Sanhedrin, accepts their testimony anyway. A couple of rabbis protest, and Rabban Gamliel turns on one of them, Rabbi Yehoshua, and says, “I decree that you come to my house carrying your walking-staff and your purse on the day of Yom Kippur that falls according to *your* calendar-reckoning.” In other words, you're going to have to break Yom Kippur if you don't accept my ruling. Rabbi Yehoshua, ruefully acknowledging Rabban Gamliel's authority to set communal norms as important as the calendar, recalls a text from Vayikra (Leviticus 23:4):

אֵלֶּה מוֹעֲדֵי ה' מִקְרָאֵי קֹדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר תִּקְרְאוּ אֹתָם

Which means: “These are the appointed times, the festivals, of God, called holy, which YOU (the Israelite people) call holy.” Rabbi Akiva goes on to re-interpret,

כִּי־בְזִמְנֹן בֵּין שְׁלֹא בְזִמְנֹן אֵין לִי מוֹעֲדוֹת אֶלָּא אֵלֹו

“Whether celebrated on their correct times or not, I (God) have no festival dates except for these ones which you, my people, designate.” Rabbi Akiva later doubles down, punning off three occurrences of the word *otam* (meaning “them”) in the verse, and vocalizing that word as *atem*, which is Hebrew for “Y'all.” Y'all have the power, says Rabbi Akiva, to establish these dates—y'all, even if you mistakenly set the wrong date; y'all, even if you set the wrong date on purpose; y'all, even if you're led astray by false witnesses. Y'all create the festival dates by agreeing together on when to observe them.

This is radical!! What do you mean, Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Akiva, that we get to set the calendar, that God has no festival dates except for the ones which we puny mortals call holy? Don't the festivals themselves come from God's infallible Torah? How can we play fast and loose with holy time?

I see in this Talmud sugya a powerful MUTUAL model of responsibility. God sets out the holy days in Torah—but people have to also create them, by calling them *holy*, observing them and setting their dates through systems that encourage communal human buy-in and participation. (This gives a whole new intention to our temple's yearly calendar meeting!) Like the proverbial tree falling alone in the woods with nobody to hear it, if a holy day happens and nobody observes it, was it really a holy day? Our sugya says no. So too the mitzvah of the shofar of our High Holy Days, which is sounded by a flesh-and-blood person—but the mitzvah is to hear, rather than to blow.⁵ Both the ba'al/at/et tokeia (shofar blower) and the one who hears are integral to the performance of the mitzvah of the shofar.

God centers mitzvot which require catalyzation, cooperation, and coordination to accomplish. We cannot do the things that matter most, without relationships of mutual support. And with those relationships, everything is possible. Let this be our kavannah, our intention, for the entire year.

Every Jewish prayer service ends with an *Aleinu*. Each time we come together we say, “It's up to us, in partnership with God, to repair this world.” Flood, wildfire, avalanches, earthquakes, stampedes, COVID—each one of us, and all of us, have the power to write one another into the book of life. It's up to us.

When I watered the rock plants, it wasn't just me. It was the communal clean water reservoir, the town pipes, the garden society who grew them in the first place. And yet, that water didn't flow till I turned on the spigot. **All life, just like all holiness, is a team effort.** May each one of us be blessed to emulate God's example of choosing and supporting life and growth; may we be blessed to partner with one another in the holy team sport of mutual responsibility, where no one is left behind.

G'mar chatimah tovah. May you be sealed for a good year.

Notes

1. Pirkei Avot 2:4
2. “‘Will I be Alive Tomorrow?’ Afghan Woman Photographer Under Threat,” *France 24*, July 7, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210707-will-i-be-alive-tomorrow-afghan-woman-photographer-under-threat-1>.
3. Talmud Bavli, B'rakhot 5b
4. David Frishman, “Three Who Ate,” in *Yiddish Tales*, trans. Helena Frank (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/33707/33707-h/33707-h.htm#page_269
5. Rosh HaShanah 27b; Rambam Hilchot Shofar 1:1, 3:10