

SERMON FOR KOL NIDREI 5776

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai

What a mess
It's not my fault
I'm just so tired
And no one listens.

Why can't someone else?
It's too far away.
Been going on so long.
And I can't change it.

Please join with me: *ai ai ai ai ai ai ai*

Why should I care?
They probably hate the Jews.
I doubt that they'd help us.
It's not my problem.

It's not good for my health.
To stress about the news.
The media makes it worse.
And I can't fix it.

ai ai ai ai ai ai ai

[Thanks to Rabbi Rob Scheinberg for the idea of an "anti-Ashamnu"]

Rabbi Debra Cantor

That's what one of my colleagues calls an "anti-*Ashmanu*," a litany of how not to take responsibility. It's funny, right? Partly because it's unexpected. Over the next 24 hours, we expect to confess to all sorts of sins we haven't personally committed. Practically the entire Yom Kippur liturgy is couched in the plural: "*Ashamnu, Bagadnu...We* abused, **we** betrayed...*Al heyv she-hatanu...*For the sin **we** sinned against You...

Yom Kippur is a day about taking responsibility, not shirking it. So the anti-*Ashamnu* I just chanted makes us laugh. But with a bit of discomfort. Because we all identify a bit with those sentiments, don't we?

Lots of days, it's just all seems overwhelming. The news, I mean. Poverty, injustice, racism, gun violence, refugees, anti-Semitism, climate change, war, disease, homelessness. The list goes on. The stories take place far away and in our own communities.

Some days, I just want to shut it off for good. Shut it off and shut it out.

There's a name for this feeling.

It's called "compassion fatigue... a condition characterized by a gradual lessening of compassion over time. It is common among individuals that work directly with trauma victims such as, therapists ... nurses, psychologists, first responders, health unit coordinators and anyone who helps out others. It was first diagnosed in nurses in the 1950s...."

With the advent of the 24-hour cable news cycle and the Internet, "journalism analysts argue that the media has caused widespread compassion fatigue in society by saturating newspapers and news shows with often decontextualized images and stories of tragedy and suffering. This has caused the public to become cynical, or... resistant to helping people who are suffering." [Wikipedia, s.v., compassion fatigue]

Sound familiar? We're barraged with bad news all day long. No wonder we become apathetic or feel a sense of hopelessness! But the truth is, though modern communications may have exacerbated this phenomenon, this is not a new problem. In Deuteronomy Chapter 22, we read the following:

If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow. If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who he or she is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your fellow claims it; then you shall give it back to him. You shall do the same with his ass; you shall do the same with his garment; and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow loses and you find: *Lo tuchal l'hitalem* - you must not remain indifferent.

Lo tuchal l'hitalem - "You shall not remain indifferent." In other words, you may not hide yourself, or pretend that you just don't see. You cannot remain neutral.

The Hebrew word *l'hitalem* literally means to hide, turn away, or ignore.

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The phrase *lo tuchal* is a bit more ambiguous. Does it mean that we actually can't turn away, or that we can but we shouldn't?

The late Israeli commenatator, Rabbi Pinchas Peli, explains: "From the moment one notices an animal gone astray, or an object lost by someone, one must not hide oneself. Whether she is busy with something else, or whether she chooses to get involved, *a person is in fact involved*, and duty bound to bring the object to her home, keeping it there safely until it can be returned to its owner."

Lo tuchal l'hitalem. You're not allowed to be indifferent. You can't pretend you don't see. Or hear. You are already involved. And the question is: what *will* you, what *can* you, do about it?

On January 14, 1963, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel delivered the keynote address at a conference on "Religion and Race" for Christian and Jewish clergy in Chicago. It was at this conference that Rabbi Heschel first met the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and it marked the beginning of a deep friendship between the two men. Heschel's speech that day was meant to jolt his listeners out of their complacency. He told them:

"There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: *indifference to evil*. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted. The prophets' great contribution to humanity was the discovery of the evil of indifference. One may be decent and sinister, pious and sinful."

This was an idea Heschel returned to again and again. Years later, in a speech about the Vietnam War, he famously declared: "Morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings... indifference to evil is worse than evil itself...in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

[From "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement" (1972); later included in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (1996)]

"Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself....Some are guilty, but all are responsible."

Lo tuchal l'hitalem. We can't pretend we didn't see. Or hear.

The rabbis of the Mishnah, in the context of rules regarding the responsibilities of the residents of a common courtyard, teach that every resident is required to contribute money towards shared improvements, such as the building of a guardhouse or gate for the courtyard. [Baba Batra 7b]

This makes sense, even today. For instance, I live in a condominium up the road from here. When there are improvements made to our common property, such as better lighting or new roofs, we all share the cost. So far, the Talmudic text seems fairly straightforward.

Rabbi Debra Cantor

But later Sages questioned this. They stated:

This would seem to show that a guardhouse is an improvement: yet how can this be, seeing that there was a certain pious man with whom [the prophet] Elijah used to converse regularly, *until he built a guardhouse*, after which Elijah never spoke to him again.

What?! This is what I love about the rabbis. We think we are reading about a mundane matter and then, all of a sudden, they throw in a wild card like this. So let's go over this again.

A pious man is used to chatting with the Prophet Elijah on a regular basis. You remember Elijah. He's the zealot from the Bible who rails against Queen Jezebel and her Ba'al worshippers; he's the angry and bitter guy who finally hears God's still, small voice in a cave; he's the one who, at the end of his life, is taken up to heaven by God in a whirlwind.

In the rabbinic view, Elijah takes on a different persona. He is a kinder, gentler figure; less judgmental and more compassionate: Elijah will bring news of the coming of the Messiah. He's the one we welcome to our seder tables in hopes of an ultimate redemption. Elijah sits with the poor and the downtrodden. He often looks like one of them. And he talks to certain folks regularly.

In our Talmudic passage, Elijah abruptly stops talking with a certain pious man, when that man installs a guardhouse outside the gate to his courtyard. Why would Elijah fault the man for adding security to his dwelling? On the surface it makes no sense.

The great commentator, Rashi, gives us a clue. He explains that it's because the guardhouse "prevented the cries of the poor from being heard within the courtyard."

It's not about security. It's about insulating yourself from the cries of the poor, blocking out the groans of the suffering. As if we live in a different world than they do.

Lo tuchal l'hitalem. You can't pretend not to see, not to hear. You're not allowed to build a wall, or station a guard at your door, to keep those cries away. It doesn't matter who caused the pain; we are obliged to care and to help.

What about compassion fatigue? What about feeling overwhelmed and powerless?

Lo tuchal l'hitalem.

According to Melila Hellner-Eshed, the haftarah we will read tomorrow morning, Isaiah 58, is a "subversive text." Isaiah is responding to the question: "What are the conditions that will allow God's amazing light to shine forth?"

A similar sentiment was echoed by Elie Wiesel, who wrote: "The opposite of love is not hate; it's indifference. The opposite of beauty is not ugliness; it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy; it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, but indifference..." [US News & World Report (27 October 1986)]