

Rabbi Debra Cantor

## **SERMON FOR KOL NIDREI 5780**

What keeps you up at night? What I mean is, late at night, when you can't sleep, what is it you think about? Lately, when I've asked people this this question, there's a pause, and then, once they realize I'm serious, they respond with something like the following:

I'm afraid about my health.

Or the health of my loved one.

I'm worried I'll lose my job.

I'm worried I'll lose my health insurance.

I'm afraid I'll outlive the money I have saved for retirement.

I'm worried about rising anti-Semitism.

I'm worried about our country.

I'm worried about hate and racism.

I'm worried about Israel.

I'm afraid I'll never pay back my loans.

I'm terrified about climate change.

I'm scared about being alone.

I'm worried about my children.

I feel so powerless.

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The question “What keeps you up at night?” is meant to be provocative. It’s routinely used by community organizers, who use a combination of asking questions and storytelling to build relationships. After sharing some personal stories, an organizer will often ask an individual or small group to respond to the question “So what keeps you up at night?” It’s a way of eliciting from participants what they care about, and what their concerns are.

Community organizers might convene dozens and dozens, even hundreds, of small group discussions like this during a “listening campaign.” Taking careful notes on the discussions, the organizers identify similar responses. Based on that (along with feasibility and other factors) the organization will choose which particular issue or issues to focus on and “embrace a justice action to effect change, ameliorate a wrong, or “to bridge a gap in social services.” (Dr. Ron Wolfson, *Relational Judaism: Using the Power of Relationships to Transform the Jewish Community*. Woodstock, VT: JEWISH LIGHTS, Publ., 2013, p.6)

My teacher, Dr. Ron Wolfson, a veteran Jewish educator and community organizer, notes that while the standard question “What keeps you up at night?” is a good one for organizing Jewish communities, he’s discovered an even better one from my colleague, Sharon Brous, a rabbi in Los Angeles.

When small groupings of members and curious guests gather... Brous says she would rather ‘ask a question that comes from a place of hope and dreams. I want my people to find a sense of purpose in their lives, [she says] So, I ask them, ‘What gets you up in the morning?’

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“What keeps you up at night?”

“What gets you up in the morning?”

The first question addresses what scares us and what needs fixing.

The second question asks what motivates us, what moves us to act.

These two questions, while evoking such different emotional responses are, of course, linked.

I am reminded of the teaching of Rabbi Tarfon, a Sage who taught during the period from the Destruction of the Temple in 70 to about 135 CE. He is quoted many times in the Mishnah and Talmud, but his most famous teaching is cited so often by rabbis and Jewish leaders that it’s almost become a cliché. Here it is, from Mishnah Avot:

רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן אוֹמֵר, הַיּוֹם קָצָר וְהַמְּלָאכָה מְרֻבָּה, וְהַפּוֹעֲלִים עֲצֵלִים  
וְהַשָּׂכָר הַרְבֵּה, וּבַעַל הַבַּיִת דּוֹחֵק:

Rabbi Tarfon said: **the day is short, and the work is great**, and the laborers are indolent, and the reward is great, and the master of the house is insistent.

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, לֹא עָלִיד הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמּוֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶן חוֹרִין לְבָטֵל מִמְּנָה.

He [also] used to say: **It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.**

**It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.**

Sounds familiar, right? It’s even a song kids sing at Jewish summer camp or in youth groups. (*Lo alecha hamlacha ligmor...*)

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*Everyone* who urges Jews to engage in social justice work quotes Rabbi Tarfon. He's the poster rabbi for *tikkun olam* projects. And why is that? Because his words reassure us. It's okay, he tells us. As a Jew, you need to devote yourself to Torah and social justice. But you don't have to finish the job!

After all, social justice work is exhausting. It's never-ending. The Torah itself acknowledges this.

In Chapter 15 of Deuteronomy, verse 4, we read: "There shall be no needy among you, since the LORD will bless you...."

And then just a few verses later, the Torah cautions the Israelites to be generous and open-hearted "for there will never cease to be needy ones in your land." (Deuteronomy 15:11)

Evidently, despite our best efforts, despite even God's blessings, poverty is intractable. Poverty, injustice, prejudice, hate, protecting the vulnerable; these are enormous *and perennial* social challenges. Tomorrow we'll read Isaiah's thundering rebuke to the Jews about to return from Babylonia to rebuild the Temple. He'll raise the same moral social issues that we grapple with today.

The realization that these issues remain, age after age, might overwhelm, or even paralyze, us. That's where Rabbi Tarfon's dictum comes to strengthen our resolve. We don't have to complete the task.

But we *do* have to engage in it.

Why?

Let's look back at the context of Rabbi Tarfon's teaching.

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***Hayom katzar v'ham'lacha merubah*** - **The day is short, and the work is great**, and the laborers are indolent, and the reward is great, and the master of the house is insistent.

There's an *urgency* to this work of social justice. It's not a hobby, not a leisure activity to be put off for when one has the time to indulge in it. *Hayom katzar* – because other people's lives depend on it. And our own lives do as well. We don't live forever. There is just so much that needs to be done! And we get lazy, says Rabbi Tarfon; we imagine we have all the time in the world. We don't.

Further, he reminds us, *has'char harbeh* - the reward is great, *u'ba'al habayit dohek*- and the Master of the House (that would be God) is insistent.

Here, at last, is the why. Why work to make things better? Why extend yourself to others? Because this is what gives your life meaning. Because this is what the *baal habayit*, what God, calls you to do. Because God urges you – urges *us* - to be partners in the unfolding and perfecting of Creation. Even though you might not live to see the results of all your efforts. Even though you surely won't.

Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz is an Orthodox rabbi and social activist. In his book, *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*, which was published by the Reform movement he writes:

[Rabbi Tarfon's teaching] helps us understand Judaism's eternal role as the spiritual beacon that enables us to develop empathy and compassion. It is easy to excuse ourselves from hard communal work because it feels as though our contribution can be significantly minimal. A litany of questions arises: In the aggregate, what could one person do? Why donate hard-earned wages? Why

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sign a petition? Why start an advocacy group? Why show up to a rally? Why vote? I'm but one person; what could my role possibly be in an ocean of other interests? But the rabbis teach that our act may be precisely the one that tips the scales. (pp. 118-119)

Maimonides addresses this very point in his writings on *teshuvah*/repentance: [He advises every person to imagine him or herself] throughout the whole year in a light of being evenly balanced between innocence and guilt, and to regard the entire world as if evenly balanced between innocence and guilt; thus, if one commits a single sin, she will tilt herself and the whole world to the side of guilt, and be a cause of its destruction; but if she performs one mitzvah, behold, she will tilt herself and the whole world to the side of goodness, and bring about her own and their salvation.... (*Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Teshuvah 3:4)

That's quite a thought experiment, isn't it? The idea that a single deed, of a single individual, that any one of us, could push the balance of the world one way or the other, toward destruction or salvation. These Days of Awe remind us that our personal choices have consequences, that our individual deeds have influence. The power of one can be powerful indeed.

But how much more power we have when we are together! In her very moving remarks tonight, Tema spoke of the "extraordinary energy emanating from you...as one connected community" at the start of the *Kol Nidrei* service. There is a palpable

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difference when we are together, as she put it, “not in our living rooms, but here, close enough to touch.”

We *all* know there is power in numbers. And there is greater power when we work together toward shared goals. When we decide to join forces with others beyond our own small community and tip the scales toward justice.

Three years ago, BTS was among a group of about 40 faith-based institutions – mostly churches, a few meeting houses, a mosque or two, a couple of synagogues – who began exploring the idea of organizing a diverse organization of lay leaders and clergy to address social justice issues in Greater Hartford. From the start, we were determined to work across boundaries of race, religion, gender identity, class and geography to build power, based on our relationships with one another.

We started with monthly clergy meetings; we scheduled one-on-one meetings in between so that we got to know each other better as the months went on. Later, there were trainings and more meetings. The experienced community organizers who worked with us were adamant: community organizing is heavy on process; it might take years for us to get this organization off the ground. And it needed to be large in order to be powerful. It would take a lot of patience and work. And faith.

I’ll tell you the truth. I really enjoyed going to the monthly meetings and having coffee dates with the other clergy. They are great colleagues; inspiring people doing amazing work. They’re from small and large, prosperous and poor, suburban and inner-city congregations, recently ordained to recently retired, from many ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

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I kept coming back, month after month, year after year, even when I was discouraged, because I wanted to us to achieve our goal. But also, because I grew to love these folks, these fellow clergy. The thing about relational power is this: you build it through connection with others. The fact is, “relationships always matter— when it comes to building power, when it comes to sustaining movements, when it comes to leadership, when it comes to connecting with individuals and groups who are different.” (<https://www.joinforjustice.org/about-us/mission-and-goals/>)

Here’s another thing about community organizing: when you identify an issue, you do a lot of homework. You figure out what can be done to address a specific problem. You figure out what’s feasible. You analyze the situation and work with the people affected. You do lots of planning and gather allies. Hopefully, you win. Sometimes you don’t. But you learn for the next time.

Community organizing isn’t about ending poverty or injustice forever. Remember what it says in Deuteronomy? It’s about working to change what can be changed: one situation, law, issue or neighborhood at a time.

And now, our brand-new organization – three years in the making – is about to be launched. It’s called the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance – GHIAA. It is a completely non-partisan faith-based organization. While we are new to the Hartford area, there are similar faith-based organizing groups which have been operating in many metropolitan areas, including New Haven, for over 60 years.

I invite you to join me for the GHIAA Founding event on Monday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, which will take place at Central CT State University’s Welte Auditorium at 6:45 pm. We hope to have 1000 people there. At the event, GHIAA will introduce its slate of issues and the founding congregations – including BTS – will participate in a roll call. It will be an incredible night, I promise you.



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I want to mention something about the timing of this event, something that only struck me recently. October 28<sup>th</sup> will mark almost exactly a year to the day since the massacre at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. We all remember that day vividly, where we were when we heard that awful news.

And it has been a difficult year for Jews *since* then, in terms of the rise in anti-Semitism. Pittsburgh was followed by the terrible synagogue shooting in Poway, by swastikas daubed on fences and homes, by shattered windows of shuls, by daily attacks on Orthodox Jews on New York; last week, on Rosh Hashanah, an assailant with a knife tried to enter a synagogue in Berlin where my friend, Rabbi Gesa Ederberg, was leading the service.

But, when I think back to last year, I recall something else as well. The calls, the emails. From Christians and Muslims and others. From my clergy friends, whom I'd come to know through our organizing meetings over the years. From neighbors. People sent us flowers. Handwritten notes. And then, that following Shabbat, the weekend after the horrific events at Tree of Life, we opened our doors to the community.

Along with synagogues across the nation, we participated in #ShowUpForShabbat. And people showed up! That Friday night, our chapel was packed. With Jews. With friends from the community. Police officers. Families. The mayor and city council members. Clergy. Folks we knew and some we didn't know.

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My colleague, Rabbi Noam Marans, Director of Interreligious and Intergroup Relations for the American Jewish Committee, wants to make #ShowUpForShabbat an annual tradition. He writes:

Jews who may not be weekly attendees should fill the pews on Oct. 25<sup>th</sup>, to commemorate the Pittsburgh tragedy and the global response of solidarity. Synagogues should open their doors to their neighbors that Friday evening and Saturday morning and allow the goodness of the overwhelming majority to prevail over the evil of the few.” (Rabbi Noam E. Marans. <https://religionnews.com/2019/09/26/four-ways-for-all-americans-to-keep-anti-semitism-from-becoming-the-new-normal/>)

Rabbi Marans reminds us that “hatred of Jews may not always be first on the list of hate priorities, but it is always in the inventory” and that “although anti-Semitism is a primary existential threat to the Jewish people, hate of the other in *all* its manifestations must be eradicated.” He goes on:

“We must not relent in our commitment to combat anti-Semitism from all its sources. We must *also* redouble our efforts in coalition building, including but not limited to Muslim-Jewish, Latino-Jewish and black-Jewish initiatives.” (Ibid.)

So this year we will follow Rabbi Marans’ wise counsel. Here at BTS, our doors are *always* open, but this year, on Friday, October 25<sup>th</sup>, *Shabbat Bereishit*, we will extend a special invitation to our friends and neighbors to join us. And two days later, on Monday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, we will join hundreds of our friends and neighbors across the region to build a better, more just world.

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And then we will begin our work – together as a community, as members of the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance and as partners with the Blessed Holy One who calls us to engage in this urgent task.

Together - addressing the issues that keep us up at night.

Together - giving us all a powerful reason to get up in the morning.

In the immortal words of Rabbi Tarfon:

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין לבטל ממנה

**It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.**

*HaRachaman* – O Source of Mercy, on this *Kol Nidrei* night, we pray that you gird us with strength and resolve.

*V'nizkeh l'mitzvot* – May we be blessed and privileged to perform many *mitzvehs*, deeds of justice and righteousness, compassion and lovingkindness in the year to come.

*Amen.*