

## ***Pote'ach et Yadecha: Open Your Hand***

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I have been thinking a lot these days about hands, that physical body part that is attached to our arms. In the Psalms we find words that make reference to God's metaphoric hands when we declare: *Potayach et yadecha u'masbia l'chol chai ratzon*. "You open Your hand, God, to care for the needs of every living creature." When we chant those words in the morning service, it is a *minhag* -- a custom -- to hold open our hand and look at the palm. I love that custom! While the words describe how God has sustained us, the tradition teaches that God has endowed *us* with the strength, the capacity and the responsibility to be present for others. We are called upon to do God's work...to be God's hands. Puerto Rico. Houston. Mexico City. Refugees fleeing war-torn countries. *Potayach et yadecha*, Open your hand.

Over the course of our High Holy Days we chant together from the list of our many confessions. We chant: *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu*... .. we betrayed...we stole...we scorned. As we chant, we gently pound our hearts in remorse... with our hands shut tight, for the recollection of our sins causes us to tighten up. But "poteyach et yadecha," just think of all the times that we are witness to the open hand and the outstretched arm. We at TBT are blessed with an inordinate number of doctors in our community. How many times I have seen those doctors open their hands in an emergency.

The hurricanes, Harvey, Irma, Jose and Maria, that so recently caused so much damage to so many people – also caused hands to open as first responders and emergency service people and just people who found themselves upright, opened their hands to help save lives. *Potayach et yadecha*... they each opened their hands; in those vital moments between life and death, they each became healing hands.

Rare, thankfully, are such times when we instantly, instinctively reach out our hands to help a person in dire need with not a moment to waste. More often we serve as God's hands with a bit more notice. We prepare and deliver a meal to a mourner, console a loved one who is hurting or reach out to a friend in crisis. We sign up to be Shabbat ushers and open our hands in welcome. *Poteyach et yadecha*, open your hand. Really, open your hands and look at them. How have your hands served others in the last year?

In a synagogue in Prague before World War II, the communal tzedakah box was shaped like an open hand so that all might understand its reciprocity: Sometimes ours are the hands that give, and sometimes we are the ones reaching for help. Over the

years many of you have dedicated yourselves to caring for others. And then one day you found yourself, the grateful beneficiary of equal kindness. We take a hand even as we utter: "I never thought I would need help." But that time inevitably comes – for all of us. So on this sacred day, I pray that many of you will answer our continuous call for helping hands.

Truth be told, the calls for "Helping Hands" here at the temple have been wonderfully answered. So many of you have told me that "YES" you want to be on the call list when we need a "Helping Hand" to help a member in our community who needs an extra hand for any one of a myriad number of reasons. And if you are not on our "Helping Hands" list and you want to be, yes I promise to add you to the list if you email me your desire to be a part of our program.

But on this day of Yom Kippur, we are commanded to open our hands for those beyond our own circle. As we move outside these doors, into other neighborhoods close by and out into the country beyond our own blocks, we have reason to be troubled by a sense that the society we live in is deeply torn and becoming unmoored from anchors we had previously trusted. "*V'ahavta reyecha k'mocha*" "Love your neighbor as yourself" forms a bedrock of our Torah as the verse sits right in the center in the Book of Leviticus. And yet we need new placards today to remind ourselves that "Wherever you come from we are glad you are our neighbor." Jewish tradition might diagnose the sense of mistrust of others as a countrywide malaise caused by a sinful shortage of open hands reaching across an ever-widening divide between all the 'us's' and all the 'thems'.

Instead of joining together to address complicated issues, too many good people have closed their hands into fearful fists. A fist that holds tight to what is mine and fears that others might take away. A fist to fend off enemies and threats – the real ones and the ones falsely maligned for political gain. A defiant fist to reassure ourselves that no matter what happens "out there," we can create a safety zone "in here," with people who think like us, who look like us, who behave just like us.

But God said, "Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the Land of Egypt." We were strangers in Egypt and felt the oppressor's lash. We were strangers in Babylonia and wept by the river. We were strangers in Yemen and Iraq, in Greece and Nairobi, in Warsaw, Berlin, St. Petersburg, Amsterdam, Buenos Aires, New York, Galveston, Savannah...and more. We've known loneliness, humiliation, false accusations, vicious hatred and the wholesale, heartless murder of our innocent children. We have been the other. In fact, we have been so harshly brutalized that if any people in the world could reasonably ask for some "me" time, time to pull down the shades and let others fend for themselves, it would be us. But no. Not us. Instead, Judaism requires us, even when we feel most comfortable, to remember what it feels like to be "them." We must be among those who reach our open hands to do holy work – reach out always -- in compassion and in pursuit of repair.

Harry Schanzer spoke movingly this morning about reaching out his open hand to his German family member. Harry's gesture of opening his hand reminded me of something Elie Wiesel said during a visit to Berlin in 1985, when he met with a group of young Germans. He said, "*I had never before considered that it could be as painful to be the children of those who ran the camps as to be the child of those who died in them.*" He then spoke of the children of his persecutors, saying: "You cannot imagine the affection I have for them. I want to help them." Just imagine the singular ability of Elie Wiesel to cross such an unimaginable divide. Wiesel's remarkable response was fueled by his finely honed sixth sense, his mastery of a quality too often absent from our world today: the quality of empathy.

Empathy, from the Greek *empathia*, is a combination of 'em,' which means 'into,' and 'pathos,' which means 'feeling.' Empathy is an entrance, a particular way of journeying into someone else's emotional world – crossing the border into the heart of the stranger. How do we get there? By paying close attention, by being open, being genuinely curious, and actively listening. You cannot enter into another's world by way of assumptions, snap judgments, stubbornness or anger. You can't enter into another's world by waiting – even patiently – for your turn to speak. Empathy tells the other person that he or she is a human being worthy of respect and concern, as Martin Buber might say, a potential 'Thou' to your 'I.' Empathy is taking a break from *me* to focus on *you*. Empathy is rejecting the notion that there is a *them* and instead an embracing of *us*.

It is not an easy skill to master, but our Jewish tradition has never taken a neutral stand on empathy. We aren't given a choice. The Torah commands, "Help the stranger, the widow, and the orphan." Help those who are vulnerable *because they are vulnerable*, no matter their background, their language, their politics, their color, their physical health or their mental health. "For we too were strangers." We know what it feels like. And if we have forgotten, we remind ourselves. That is why today, on Yom Kippur, we collectively give voice to transgressions we did not all commit. That is why on Passover we eat the bitter herbs of slavery and taste the tears of the oppressed. And that is why next week, during Sukkot, we will experience life's fragility by eating and even sleeping in flimsy huts – quite literally moving outside of our comfort zone. With each act we are ritually and consciously re-committing ourselves to developing our own sixth sense: the ability to respond to others with empathy.

A Chasidic tale is told of a rabbi who overhears a conversation between two Russian peasants in a tavern. Both have clearly had their share of vodka. The first one asks, "My friend, do you love me?"

"Yes, yes," says the second, "of course I love you."

"No," persists his friend. "Be honest, do you truly love me?"

"Yes," says the first peasant, "I love you with all of my heart."

"No, no you don't. You don't love me because you've never asked what hurts me. How can you love me if you don't know what hurts me."

It turns out that empathy, the art of truly understanding what causes another's pain and what fuels another's joy, is not in the human DNA. We have to keep practicing empathy to stay good at it. Perhaps that is why the Torah includes thirty-six distinct reminders to understand and protect those who need our help – thirty-six -- more reminders than for any other mitzvah.

Educational psychologist Michele Borba wrote a book that should be required reading for all parents (for all of us, actually). It's called: UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World. Borba reveals how the pressure on today's kids toward self-admiration and the self-curating of their lives on social media has increased their narcissism, anxiety, entitlement, bullying and cheating - the hazards for them, and us, of living in a "selfie" world. But just as self-absorption can be learned, so can empathy. The author gives thoughtful, practical lessons in how to be just as diligent about strengthening our children's capacity for empathy as we are about tutoring them in math or coaching them in soccer. Kids as young as preschoolers can boost their moral imaginations by learning to take the pulse of a friend's feelings.

Empathic children become change-makers like Natalie Hampton, a 16-year-old, who, after sitting miserably alone at lunch for an entire year, designed an app called "Sit With Us," that guides kids to lunch tables where they will be welcomed, not shunned. In this New Year, before we ask our kids "what did you learn today?" let's be sure to ask, "Did you reach out a hand to help anyone today?" And let's follow up with, "How do you think that made her feel? How did it make you feel to help?"

As we teach our children, let us learn as well, repenting for all the times we ignored an opportunity to understand what was in a co-worker's heart, or truly feel a friend or child or partner's pain, or refused to reach across the differences that divide us from our neighbors to try to discover, and cement, our shared humanity.

The two greatest rabbinic leaders of the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century, Hillel and Shammai, contested mightily with each other about Jewish law. The Talmud records over 300 arguments between them. With few exceptions, Hillel's school won, the law decided their way, even though, the text tells us, both rabbis uttered words worthy of God's praise. So why do Hillel's opinions prevail? Because, the text teaches, Hillel and his students always listened first, always respected and recorded Shammai's opinions, always weighed their opponents' point of view and gave them their full due.

It should be no surprise to learn that it was Rabbi Hillel who condensed the whole Torah down to the single phrase, "What is hateful to you, do not do to others." Hillel also famously said: "If I am not for myself, who am I? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" The time, of course, is now.

We Jews must not allow the growing discourse of division to continue to take its toll in a world that has turned ever more suspicious, divided, and callous. We who were strangers, refugees, feared, different, hated – we know well -- sadly, we still know well -- the outsider's heart. It is our sacred responsibility... to walk in those others' shoes and to shower our neighborhoods, our communities and our nation -- with empathy, empathy to cultivate real understanding across racial, cultural, political and religious lines. If those we seek to know better don't live right down the street from us, we need to look for them. We need to step outside our comfort zone and find them, seek out their memoirs, their Ted talks, their podcasts, posts and poetry, and start listening to them.

We learn from Rabbi Hillel that understanding an opposing position does not have to end in agreement. In fact, one of my favorite words from the Talmud is "*Teiku*." It is a term that says that sometimes no one of us has the right answer. The rabbis of the Talmud argued and argued and honored the fact that sometimes they couldn't come to resolution, in which case they would conclude their discussions with "*Teiku*." We can disagree without being disagreeable and we can share in the hope that one day our disagreements may be resolved.

Empathy has been called "the radicalism of our time." Let us then be radicals! We cannot retreat from the Jewish tradition that has been commanded to us since antiquity, to open our hands, to heal wounds and to fight for justice.

In 5778 let us be those with open hands, with strong hands, who instinctively, and with a sense of urgency, reach out to help, steadily and without pause. *Pote'ach et yadecha*, we pray. Open Your hand, O God. And, as we enter this New Year, on this sacred day of Yom Kippur, we also pray: *Tiftach et yadeinu*. God, dear God, in this New Year, open ours.

*Ken Yehi Ratzon  
May it be God's will.  
Amen*