

The Year of *Lo Alecha*

There was once a synagogue which had a much-beloved, long-serving rabbi. One Yom Kippur, he delivered a masterful sermon, enthraling the congregation and leaving them inspired. Everyone agreed it was the best sermon they'd ever heard.

The following year, much to the confusion of the congregation, the rabbi delivered the *exact same sermon* - word for word. They wondered if they'd missed something... maybe it was different in a subtle way? Maybe they were misremembering? However, that thought was put to rest a year later when the rabbi stood on the pulpit and again delivered the same sermon, verbatim. Some of the congregants began to snicker; others were angry. "This is why we come to shul? To hear the rabbi repeat the same sermon year after year?" Still others felt concern for him. "Has our beloved teacher lost his way?"

The president of the synagogue met with the chairperson of the ritual committee and they decided to approach the rabbi with a mixture of tenderness and worry. At lunch one day, they said, "Rabbi, you know that we all love you. But you have delivered the same Yom Kippur sermon three years in a row, and well, people are beginning to notice."

The rabbi put down his knife and fork and said, "Really? The same sermon? Three years in a row?"

"Yes Rabbi, you have delivered the exact same sermon for three years."

"Goodness gracious!" the rabbi replied. And then, after a long pause, asked, "Well tell me... what did I say?"

There was silence at the other end of the table. The President and Committee chair put down their silverware, wiped their chins with their napkin, and looked at each other, dumbfounded.

The rabbi replied, “Well, maybe I should give it just one more year.”¹

<<Pause>>

It has been said that rabbis - really, all clergy people - have one sermon that we recycle over and over. That’s not to say that we literally dust off the same old sermon year after year; rather, we are each the living embodiment of one message that we continually share, week after week, year after year, just packaged differently.

The greatest rabbis figure out how to make their message compelling each time they deliver it; the rest of us... well, we just hope that you need to hear the message as much as we need to say it. The truth is, we each eagerly anticipate the day when our sermons are no longer needed, when they are no longer relevant. Sadly, we’re not there yet.

My “one sermon” boils down to two words: “Be Kind.” If you heard any of my sermons on Rosh Hashanah, you’ve already heard that message from me. That doesn’t mean you should get up and leave! Think of it like a romantic comedy: just because you’re pretty sure you know how it will end, doesn’t mean you won’t enjoy the twists and turns on the way there.

So... “Be Kind.” It’s a single action - more of a way of life, really - but it can be put into practice in so many ways. And because it’s my primary pitch, I’ve found many ways to talk about it: sometimes the message is cloaked in Torah texts about loving the stranger, opening our homes to guests, or making morally right decisions. Other times, it gets tucked into a philosophical conversation about I-Thou relationships, and recognizing that we are in an eternal relationship with one another. And just last week, I spoke about being less stuck in our ways, moving past tribalism to see things from other people’s points of view. Until it’s no longer necessary, I can keep coming up with creative and interesting ways to talk about how we should be kind to each other.

¹ <http://ourtemple.org/yom-kippur-sermon-just-one-more-year/>

And sadly, it *is* something we still need to hear again and again. Often, the message is sparked by behavior that I've witnessed in our community: unchecked rage directed at inappropriate targets; unabashed rudeness towards loved ones; ungrateful attitudes in spite of - or perhaps because of - our lives of privilege and abundance.

I recently took a long walk with one of our members. As we strolled around Sharon, we discussed the state of the world, and she professed a feeling of despair that her efforts to change things were insufficient. She asked, "How do I know if I'm doing enough?" And I replied, "If you have to ask the question, you can do more."

In years past, my message for Yom Kippur could have been the general theme of kindness - extending kindness inward and outward, or "*v'ahavta l'reyacha kamocha*" ("Love your neighbor as yourself") which is something I've spoken about a lot recently. In any other year, I might have told you that listening is the most crucial action; I would tell you to do what you're able to do, to give what you can give, and to focus on mending fences and working to understand other people. *This is not that year.*

In any year, there is no such thing as "enough" when it comes to doing good. There is always one more deserving cause, one more act of *gemilut chasadim*, one more slight to forgive. At some point, in past years, it has behooved us to say, "*Dayeinu* - it's enough for now." *This is not any other year.*

No, friends - this year is different, and so this year needs to *be* different. This needs to be the "Year of *Lo Alecha*." You may be familiar with the saying - perhaps in song form - from Pirkei Avot:

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגַמְרָהּ, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְהַבְטִיל מִמֶּנָּה

"It is not your duty to finish the work - but neither are you free to neglect it."

(Pirkei Avot, 2:16)

This is the year that we must all take stock of the ways in which we are neglecting the work that is needed to repair the world. As we begin this year, we must each see it as an opportunity to participate in something greater - a chance to help usher in a year that is not more of the same, but *something better*. And that *something better* starts with taking action - not *thinking* about doing it, not *talking* about doing it, not even *planning* to do it... but well and truly *doing* something. Put another way: "Thoughts and prayers" are more for the one who offers them than for the recipient. We. must. offer. more.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the *Mussar* movement in the 19th century, wrote, "Spiritual needs are superior to physical needs. But the physical needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs. A pious Jew is not one who worries about his fellow man's soul and his own stomach; a pious Jew worries about his own soul and his fellow's stomach".

Both this morning's Haftarah and Rabbi Salanter push us to ask ourselves: in what ways are we taking care of the physical needs of our fellow human beings? Only the foolish or heartless would lay claim to the moral high ground while watching innocent people suffer and die. Would God have cared if Sarah offered up a prayer on behalf of Hagar and Ishmael so soon after condemning them to what was likely a slow, torturous death? It seems unlikely; both the Haftarah and Rabbi Salanter argue that God is not interested in our prayers unless we are concerned more about the basic needs of others than our own souls.

One way to start is by looking around and asking, "Does everyone have what they need?" I hope you would agree that everyone does not, in fact, have what they need. People are hungry - not just "There are starving children in Africa" hungry, but also "Can't afford breakfast in Massachusetts" hungry. People are dying - not

just from cancer, but also from preventable gun violence, lack of access to appropriate healthcare, and so much more. And we have a moral responsibility to work towards shifting the balance to be more equitable. It is a daunting task, to be sure - but this is the *Year of Lo Aleicha*. You are not free to ignore it.

This is our inheritance as Jews, gifted straight from Abraham. Tradition tells us that his tent was open on all sides, so that he could see passersby and run towards them, offering them shelter and food. We learn specifically of his encounter with three angels, to whom he offered food and shelter with no expectation of recompense. But we know of this incident precisely because - much to Abraham's surprise - the guests turned out to be angels. The implication, though, is that there were many more scenes that played out similarly but were not recorded because the beneficiaries of Abraham's hospitality were mere mortals. Of this, French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote:

Abraham bequeathed to his heirs a difficult tradition of duties toward the other man, with which he is never done, an order from which he is never free. Here duty takes the form of obligation toward the body, the obligation of feeding and sheltering.

We are not expected to keep our doors open to anyone who happens to wander by; times have changed, after all. But ask yourself this: in 5780, this new year we have just entered, what is the equivalent of Abraham's radical hospitality? And what are you doing to live up to your place in his lineage?

It turns out that if rabbis have one sermon, rabbis' husbands have one critique that they give over and over. Josh's biggest criticism of my sermons is that they too often build toward a call to action - a directive - and then fail to provide ways for you to move forward. I get that; there's value in telling you what to do. But simply giving you an answer makes it charity, with a fixed measure - if I tell you, go give some *tzedakah*, then you could conceivably make a donation and say,

“Well, my work here is done!” No, your job is to take that urge to do something small, to check off the box that says you fulfilled your Yom Kippur mission, and turn it into a lifelong habit.

This isn't like showing up at the gym for a few weeks in January, only to let your membership go unused for the next 11 months. This is about changing who we are, as individuals and as a community. Radical kindness requires a radical shift in our being and in our thinking. And if we truly shift our orientation, we don't get “worn out” from this unsustainable new routine. Rather, we begin to realize that this new view is, in itself, what makes life sustainable.

So I ask you:

Can you imagine picking an issue that could make the world a better place and lobbying your elected officials to make it a reality?

Can you think about how you might speak to a child - yours, your child's, your sibling's, your friend's - and introduce them to the idea that there are people who have literally nothing, and that both you and that child can help those who need it most?

Can you envision how you might make this world more hospitable to your grandchildren by taking action on a local level?

These are lofty goals to be sure; this is bigger than all of us, but this is the “Year of *Lo Aleicha*.”

For my part, I have committed myself to a number of different avenues. Among them are: working with local interfaith clergy to combine efforts to solve local community concerns; reading more books that challenge my notion of myself and my place in this world (and am looking for people to join me); and starting a grassroots campaign to make Temple Israel more green (and I'm looking for people to join me for this one too - I want to think about solar panels,

composting, reusable mugs & dishes, and much more. If this piques your interest, please reach out).

I invite you to think deeply about what about this world is keeping you up at night and pick a cause to work towards. If something I have mentioned speaks to you, I invite you to have a conversation about how we can work together.

And if what works for me doesn't work for you, if there is an idea that is gnawing at you, a seed that you can't quite plant without assistance, then let's talk about how to best nurture it into something that can change the world - even just a small piece of it. My door is always open.

A wise mentor of mine once told me that a rabbi's job is to comfort and to agitate: to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. My objective here is not to make you feel good; after all, Yom Kippur is not about feeling warm and fuzzy. Yom Kippur is about stretching ourselves to the very boundaries of who we thought we were, until we recognize that we must *do* better and *be* better - and we give ourselves over to God to judge whether we will be allowed to do so in the coming year.

So how do you know if you're doing enough? I promise you: you're not. *I'm* not. This year is the Year of *Lo Aleicha*, and it's time for us all to realize that our souls are worth exactly as much as we do to make this world a better place - no more and no less. It is not your job to complete the work, but neither are you free to ignore it; so when we meet here again next year, what will you be able to say you have done?

G'mar Chatimah Tova.