

YOM KIPPUR 5780

Rabbi David Edleson

“LO BASHAMAYIM HI”

¹¹ Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. ¹² It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” ¹³ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?” ¹⁴ No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. – Deuteronomy 30

This is a revolutionary statement! *It is not in the heavens.*

Ancient religions of that time tended to see law as very much being in the heavens, and only a demigod, a mythic hero with superhuman strength or superhuman allies and power could possibly retrieve it. But here we have a radically different view of the source of the knowledge of justice.

It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “who will go up to the heaven for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it? “

But didn't Moses do exactly that?

Only Moses could go up to the mountain and bring back the tablets. It is already a divergence from the literature of its time that Moses is not a superhero; he is a reluctant hero, one without some of the key skills needed for his task, in many ways an underdog set up to fail, a fugitive, who for reasons that are never clear, is chosen by God to be the one to bring back the law to the Israelites. That Moses is so human is one of the reasons the Torah endures as literature, but here, a few books later in Deuteronomy, we have a completely new idea of where law originates.

It is in your mouth and in your heart for you to do it.

The knowledge of right and wrong, the ability to empathize and recognize injustice even when it benefits us, that is already part of who we are if we can but let ourselves be our best selves. It is innate in us, in our hearts and our mouths. We were each created good, in the image of God, *b'tzelem Elohim*.

Today's reading passage was deeply important to the rabbis who transformed the religion of the Bible to what we know as Judaism. They made a religion that had been bound to a Temple - portable, so it can be celebrated where we go around the world. They also made clear that the responsibility and the authority to make law now resides among the representatives of the people, among their leaders, not in some supernatural voices and revelations.

In one of the most famous stories in the Talmud, all the rabbis of the Great Court agreed about that a certain type of clay oven could not be made kosher, except for one. There's always one. Rabbi Eliezer

was certain the oven could be made kosher and when his arguments didn't convince any of the other rabbis, he decided to go over their heads. He would perform miracles to convince them. He asked a tree to leap half a football field, and it did. All the other rabbis rolled their eyes, and said, "we don't decide laws by leaping trees." Rabbi Eliezer told the water in an aqueduct to flow uphill and it did. The other rabbis didn't budge. He ordered the walls of the Sanhedrin to fall inward, and they did, but one of the rabbis tells them to stop. Finally, Rabbi Eliezer said, "If I'm right, let a voice from heaven declare I'm right," and it did. The other rabbis shrugged and said they no longer make decisions about law based on voices from heaven, and to prove their point, they used a verse from the Torah: *Lo bashamayim hi* - It is not the heavens.

It is we, the living, who are responsible for creating a good and holy society, one that recognizes the that all human beings are in God's image, and that we must take care of our most vulnerable members.

In Exodus, miracles were meant to show us God's power, and that we depend on God for all things, and should obey God's decrees.

But here, in Deuteronomy, miracles obligate us to action. Because our people experienced the miracle of liberation and freedom from bondage, we as a people are now obligated to liberate and free others.

It is not as obvious as we sometimes think to have our past traumas motivate us toward helping others. Experience something traumatic like slavery and escape can actually make us withdrawn, protective, distrustful. As Rashi points out, the memory of pain turns us into people who cause others pain; the abused becomes the abuser.

But we can choose instead to rise from our pain and work to prevent such things from happening again to us or anyone else. If we hold to our fundamental belief in human dignity and our ethical imperative to help those most vulnerable, we rise to holiness.

It is OUR choice: to be a blessing or a curse. This makes us a "choosing" people. We must choose well.

As my teacher Dr. Micah Goodman said, *"in Deuteronomy, miracles come with responsibility. Because God liberated us, we must now liberate others. We must find ways of transforming our pain into passion, both for our people, and for increasing justice and equity in society."*

The Covenant at Sinai obligates us to serve God by working for justice and a fair treatment of all people in our society. Over and over, we are reminded that we were slaves in Egypt, and that obligates us to treat strangers with dignity and respect.

The Haftarah Bruce read from Isaiah 58 makes that point powerfully clear: The covenant, Isaiah rants, is not about fasting because God said so, but rather, if our fast is to be acceptable to God, we must use it to remind ourselves:

*⁶to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,*

and to break every yoke.
⁷ *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
 and bring the homeless poor into your house;
 when you see the naked, to cover them,
 and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*
⁸ *Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
 and your healing shall spring up quickly;*

This passage was chosen by our tradition to read on the holiest day of our year. This sense of covenant to work for justice is not peripheral to Judaism; it is central to it.

And this is not just for us as individuals. It is incumbent on us as a community. On Yom Kippur we don't just repent for our own sins, but for the sins of our community, our own failures to act. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, wrote:

"We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people."

We must not be among the silent, not at times such as these, when so much is at stake. As a synagogue our mission is to make a place where progressive Jews and come and pray and find Jewish community. But we must also address the ethical issues of our times; we have a covenant not only to worship, but to work to create justice.

The Reform Movement has long been a leader in civil rights and economic justice. We should be so proud of our movement, and of the Religious Action Center here in the US, and the Israel Religious Action Center that is deeply involved in some of the key civil rights law successes in Israel.

Here at Temple Sinai, we are working to deepen our worship, strengthen our relationships, teach our children well, and work to help those in need in our community, and to be part of creating a more just society. That work is centered in the Social Action Committee. They have already contributed so much to Temple Sinai, and I want to thank them for their work and invite others to join in that work.

We have worked with the Jewish community all across the state of Vermont to create a campaign to raise money for legal aid for those in detention at the border or separated from their children. Deuteronomy teaches us that we must not oppress a resident alien, because we were aliens in the Land of Egypt. Many of our parents and grandparents were displaced or were refugees. We know the heart of the oppressed, and so regardless of our political persuasion, surely as Jews we can agree that we have a duty to work toward the fair and human treatment of those who are displaced. If you haven't given to the campaign, please consider doing so.

And this afternoon, we have a great opportunity to learn and discuss these issues with Dr. Pablo Bose, who will talk to us about current pressures creating these waves of migrants around the world, and the decisions we will be facing in the near future. Please come to this important discussion on the topic of

refugees and social Action. We have entitled his talk, “*Who by fire and who by water*” to make clear its connection to our prayers on Yom Kippur.

The Social Action committee is also involved in the new South Burlington Food Pantry, and we are now collecting foods to take there when it opens in the next few weeks. We want to make sure Temple Sinai is strongly represented in the volunteer crew, and that over time we are part of finding other ways to address hunger in our society.

There are many opportunities to get involved, and there are orange sheets that gives you more information.

Last night, I complained about those who dismiss religion in the name of science. But I think Abraham Joshua Heschel makes a powerful point when he writes:

“It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion--its message becomes meaningless.”

It is we, the living, who must work to make Judaism relevant and meaningful in our lives, in our community, and to our children. I want this community to see social action as central, not peripheral, to who we are as a synagogue and who we are as Jews.

Justice is not in the heavens, our Torah teaches us. It is right here in our hands. It is not too hard for us; it is not too far away. It is simply up to us to choose. Let us as a community choose to be active in helping those around us. Let us do what we can to feed those who are hungry, to house those who are homeless, to help the stranger and refugee among us, to use our voices for what we know is right. Let us warmly welcome our new neighbors, the new home of the local mosque. Let us choose blessing and life that we and our children and this planet may long endure.

Ken Y’hi Ratzon