

WHO CARES?

*Erev Yom Kippur 5767 — Monday, October 2, 2006
Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas
Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff*

I wish to share with you a story which speaks to the very heart of this night. Clearly, it is a Yom Kippur story, for it stands in judgment over who and what we are. It addresses a basic issue of our humanity...an element essential for a meaningful and fulfilled life, an element so often missing in our world: caring — caring for you, for me, for the neighbor down the street, for the stranger halfway across the world.

A while back, while doing some grocery shopping near my home, I ran into a congregant. In seeing her, I realized that she had not been around the synagogue for a while. I knew that she had been active over the years, and was a more-than-occasional attendee at Shabbat services. Casually, I approached and greeted her. After some light conversation, I mentioned that I missed seeing her.

Immediately, this woman's countenance changed. With a mixture of anger, frustration, and resignation, she replied, "I've hung it up. It's no use anymore. People just don't care." I was somewhat taken aback. Not quite knowing how to respond, I looked at her and said, "Surely you don't mean that. Lots of people care." With a sad smile on her face, this woman said, "I think you're deluding yourself, Rabbi." Realizing there was more to this woman's statement than a grocery-store-conversation could resolve, I asked if I might come over

sometime to talk about her concerns. With some reluctance, she agreed.

A few days later, I found myself in her living room talking about her earlier statements. When I gently inquired about her attitude and her parallel disengagement from congregational activities, a sense of anger and abandonment came rushing forth from her.

"Why should I put out the effort? No one cares anymore. Everyone's in their own little world. Nothing else. When I was in the hospital, did anyone come see me? When older people need companionship, is there anyone at the door? When a husband dies — sure, there's an outpouring of sympathy and attention for the widow. But what about two or three weeks later or even three months later when people are really needed? Are they there, then? No, I'm sorry, Rabbi. No one cares..."

Those pained eyes and her accusing finger are indelibly impressed upon my mind.

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This woman's accusation is our lesson on this Kol Nidrei night. In all of the various themes of this holiday that impinge upon our hearts and minds — repentance, forgiveness, sin, renewal, growth — in all of these, our response to another human being, our

hearkening to another's cry, is the essential element.

When we read (in our prayerbook) ~~שמעו ושמעו~~ (at chet she che tana)

— for the sin which we have sinned against You by withholding our love from those who depend on us," we are speaking about caring. When we listen to tomorrow's Haftarah portion, especially the words: "If you remove the chains of oppression, the menacing hand, the malicious word; if you make sacrifices for the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted; then shall your light shine in the darkness," we are being called to compassion. When we retell the story of Jonah tomorrow afternoon, we will be reminded of God's caring for the people of Ninevah, and even for their cattle. Finally, when on this Atonement Day, we invoke the prayer, Unetanah Tokef, we say: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed...who shall live and who shall die; who shall be tranquil and who shall be troubled..." Not once do we ask who shall care and who shall ignore. The idea of caring is so basic to our identities as Jews and as human beings that it is not the judgment but the basis upon which we are judged. Spiritual life or death, tranquility or turmoil: these are our destinies based on our ability, our willingness to reach out and to take another's hand. Our entire Yom Kippur ritual — from prayer to confession to scriptural reading — forms a singular, clarion call for us to become a caring community.

That said, if this Atonement Day has any meaning, then we must be honest enough and admit that — often — we don't seem to care. You or I will speed

right past a stalled motorist on I-435. We just don't get around to visiting Aunt Sadie in the hospital. We forget about the lonely hours our widowed friends endure night after night. We fail to bring a grocery bag of food with us tonight to feed the hungry.

Please don't misunderstand. Often in this demanding world, we find ourselves overwhelmed beyond our imaginations with work and responsibility. In order just to do our jobs as worker, as parent, as caregiver — we put on the blinders of emotional detachment. Our capacity for caring is inhibited by our need to survive each day.

Sometimes, we fail to care because we feel vulnerable. One song's lyrics told it all: "Sometimes when we touch, the honesty's too much."¹ There is no doubt that caring involves pain. When going to the hospital to see Aunt Sadie, we experience our own uneasiness. We see the suffering and feel the helplessness, so we become distressed. The toll can be exacting. Many — rather than opening themselves up to pain and hurt — pull back from caring.

At other moments, our failure to care comes from being afraid...afraid to become involved. How often do we hear of those who intend to help...and they, themselves, become the victims? Driving down I-435 at 11:30 on a Sunday night...are you going to stop and help that stranded motorist? Unlikely. From all we read and see and hear, we are programmed not to care.

Certainly it entails risks to become involved in other people's lives. Being

overwhelmed, being vulnerable, being afraid – all are risky propositions. But aren't risks part and parcel of our very existence? We take them every day. We take a risk when we drive our cars. We gamble when we make financial investments. We take a chance every time we leave our homes. Though risks are involved, nevertheless, we take them. Why? Because they are calculated. Because there is a trade-off between risks taken and rewards gained. We expect — we hope — the rewards will far outweigh the risks.

So, what about caring? Is it not also a matter of calculated risks? Admittedly, the results cannot be measured in terms of financial or social status. But the gift we receive for caring is the most precious reward possible...knowing that we have been God's partner in Tikkun Olam, in healing the world's pain and brokenness.

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I was sitting in a small coffee shop in a village in Gondar province. I was the lone white face in a sea of Ethiopian blacks. Five of us were sitting around the table – one owned the village's sole internet café; another worked in the coffee shop; a third was a construction laborer; my interpreter, and me. A young boy, around 9 years old, came up to us trying to sell us small packets of tissues. He looked just like all the other child beggars I had encountered...but there was something different. He had a hunger in his eyes that was palpable...and he had a huge red welt on one side of his face.

I found out from my friends that the boy's parents had died of AIDS. Not one family member in his distant village would take him in...it was hard enough to care for their own. He walked 30 miles on his own to this village, hoping to find work. He had wandered in to the café, looking for food and a job. This group of four men had spent hours and hours with him, feeding him, giving him little jobs, and finally arranged for him to stay with a woman on the outskirts of town. She was a single grand-mother, with five grandchildren for whom she was responsible. She had agreed, welcoming him into her home.

But all of us could tell something was now wrong. We sat the boy down, fed him, and began asking questions. He hadn't been back to the woman's home for over a week. He wouldn't say why he left. He kept saying he was strong enough to be out on his own. He had been sleeping on the street. An older boy had stolen his begging money in a fight...thus the welt. He had not eaten in two days.

An hour later, we walked him to the woman's house. She reached out for him when she saw us, but he recoiled and started to cry. He had broken a plate and thought that she would beat him. We spent the next hour helping him understand that he had a safe place in which to live. He had a home.

I looked around this new home of his, in which the woman and six children lived. It consisted of two rooms, each about 8' x 10', both with walls made of straw and mud, with a hard concrete floor and tin roof. Their furniture consisted of one platform, on which she slept, a table and two chairs, some

handmade shelves along one wall, with their meager possessions barely filling them.

I didn't get it. How could this woman accept another body to sleep in this space, let alone another mouth to feed? Later, I found out that this group of four men had been paying the woman \$10 a month (a princely sum for Ethiopian villagers) to help her care for not just this little boy but for her grandchildren, as well.

Why? Why were they doing this? Why did they spend money they, themselves, barely had on a homeless, orphan boy? Why did they expend so much energy and time keeping him safe and on the right track?

When we were all done, and sitting back at the café, I asked my questions. Each smiled at the other, then my interpreter replied. "Each one of us," he said quietly, "has been that young boy. All of us were orphans at early ages. And only because someone cared – in my case, it was an American teacher – that we survived. If we don't care for his young boy, who will?"

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As the poet, Hugh Prather, so elegantly stated: "We need other people, not in order to stay alive, but to be fully human...How genuine is my capacity for love if there is no one for me to love...Unless there is someone to whom I can give my gifts...then I am not human. I am a thing, [merely] a gadget that works, but has no [soul]."

* * *

A friend from Columbus, Ohio, forwarded an email to me. His accompanying message was: "What is wrong with us? Why can't we Jews do this?"

I was intrigued, so I kept reading. The email was about a family in crisis. The mom was diagnosed with cancer. She had been the income producer, while her husband was back in school full-time for a year, getting a business degree. They had three small boys. The month before she had been diagnosed, the family attended a church for the first time. They knew no one, but felt like this was the right spiritual home for them. When she was diagnosed, she called the pastor, apologized for not having met her before, and poured out her heart.

So, the email? It was the church's caring ministry reaching out to members of the church to help the family. The email was asking for: money to help pay the mortgage; money to help pay for the husband to finish his education; caregivers for the children during the day – picking them up, taking them to school, watching them in the afternoons; drivers to take the wife to chemo and her doctors' appointments; volunteers to cook meals for the family over the three months of treatment...and the list went on.

I called the pastor up and asked about the family, the church and her ministry. She told me that the church consisted of 550 members. And they had probably 3 or 4 such caring ministry projects going on at any one time.

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Author Maggie Davis once wrote, "Sometimes we have a mission we will likely not accomplish in one lifetime; still, we travel toward that star...Imagine if we considered everyone family...who wouldn't we love? Who ever would have to suffer...alone?"

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On this Yom Kippur, we are called to reclaim our souls, for as Jews, we choose to care. We place it before ourselves as a moral imperative because it is fundamental to our faith.

We are taught that our lives are like fruit. Like fruit on trees, we grow; and eventually, we ripen. Unless we open ourselves up wide and let others drink from our juices of caring and lovingkindness, then the seeds, the essence of our very beings, will be locked up forever. They will never be dispersed upon the earth. And that would be tragic.

For in this analogy, it is our seeds that serve as our link to immortality. If we open our outer protective shells and allow our seeds — our acts of caring, of goodness, of sharing — to go forth and live, then in time, they will take root and generate their own growth and life.

Such caring comes in the form of 4 Ethiopian village men caring for an orphaned boy. Such caring comes

when a community embraces a woman and her family as she struggles with illness. Such caring comes when we simply fill up a bag of groceries and bring them on Yom Kippur to feed those who have so little. Such caring emerges out of our very souls.

Thus we read in the Talmud: "There are ten strong things. Iron is strong, but fire melts it. Fire is strong, but water quenches it. Water is strong, but the clouds evaporate it. Clouds are strong, but wind drives them away. Humanity is strong, but fears cast us down. Fear is strong, but wine allays it. Wine is strong, but sleep overcomes it. Sleep is strong, but death is stronger. But acts of caring and lovingkindness survive even death."

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I was sitting in the living room of my congregant from the grocery store. I listened to her accusations against ourselves and our community. When she finished, I said in defense, "That's not true. There are a lot of people who care." She looked me square in the eyes and said, "Well, if that's so, name some of those people."

I paused, not knowing who to list.

Can I give her your name.

Can I?

ⁱ Dan Hill; "Sometimes When We Touch"