

Finding Yourself – Yom Kippur 5780
By Rabbi Eve Posen – October 9, 2019

As most of you know, in January I had the distinct privilege and honor to go to Guatemala with American Jewish World Service. This trip was a part of the Global Justice Fellowship, a six-month fellowship of 15 rabbis across the spectrum of Jewish belief, in which we learned about rights-based advocacy and moral courage, and we experienced with our own bodies, minds, and spirits life in Guatemala in 2019.

What you may not know is that I was very hesitant to join this group. Ruth Messinger, the Global Ambassador for AJWS, was gracious enough to write the forward to *Pirkei Imahot*, the book I co-authored with Lois Shenker. And not long after we finished the book, Ruth invited me to apply to the program. I turned her down. Why? My list of reasons was long: I had a small baby who was still nursing, I was too busy, I'm not justice minded enough, I don't do well travelling internationally. I probably had a few more "I can't's" in there just to make my point. So I politely declined and asked to be thought of the next year. I quickly put this opportunity out of my mind, thinking it just wasn't right for me.

I then spent the next year teaching the beautiful text Ruth herself had written as the introduction to our book. I want to share her words with you, because they continue to inspire me to this day. She wrote:

I work in and outside the Jewish community to make social change and create a greater degree of justice in the world. What I have learned from this experience is: "We cannot retreat to the luxury of being overwhelmed."

I know many Jews who are motivated to act for others but not sure how to proceed and also many who are activists working for social change who become discouraged and cut back or stop being involved. They talk about the frustratingly slow pace at which change occurs, how many setbacks arise, how many different issues and challenges there are competing for their attention.

Often, people say that it is too much, that they are overwhelmed because they cannot do everything, they cannot do anything. I certainly reassure them we all feel this way some of the time, but to feel or be overwhelmed and use that as an excuse to move away from work for social justice is a convenient out. It is a luxury we simply cannot allow ourselves to enjoy when we know there are human beings in trouble, in need of our not retreating. It is our responsibility to work through the feeling of being overwhelmed, find ways in which we can make a difference, and remember our tradition teaches that to save one life is to save the world.

It's a powerful message. And each time I quoted these words, I felt a twinge inside me. I was retreating to my luxury. I felt too busy, too unsure, too needed by my family to let myself even try to understand how I could be a part of the greater good in our world. Ruth's teaching

reminded me of my favorite teaching from *Pirkei Avot*: “You are not obligated to complete the task, neither are you free to desist from it.”

I can't solve every problem, but I must try.

My friends, we live in a world where there are daily reminders of how much work there is to do in order to make this a world in which I want to raise my children. It's a world that can feel more broken than whole, a world where the news leads with hate and violence, and where fear and ignorance too often reign. It was because of this that I took the leap. I agreed to apply and, if accepted, take this journey.

To say the trip was life changing sounds like hyperbole, but it's true. On a very basic level, I learned some things about myself that I had completely forgotten since becoming a mother. I remembered how much I like to read, how much I really do enjoy travel, and that, when necessary, I can pack lightly. That one shocked me the most.

Most importantly, I found out what it means to have moral courage. **Moral courage** is the **courage** to take action for **moral** reasons, despite the risk of adverse consequences. **Courage** is required to take action even in the face of doubts or fears about the consequences. Which means it's different than bravery. And it's different than the Jewish value of *chesed*, of kindness. These can be spontaneous. **Moral courage** involves deliberation or careful thought.

Atticus Finch, perhaps the greatest moral compass in American literature, offers this insightful explanation of courage to his son Jem. “It's when you know you're licked before you begin, but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what.”

Throughout history, we can point to examples of moral courage. From Rosa Parks' decision to sit firmly in her seat, to Oskar Shindler's dedication to his workers, we can see what happens when we act from a place of moral courage. When you see what's ahead, and you proceed anyway.

In Guatemala I met with superheroes like this, men and women, who exhibit moral courage on a daily basis. The safety and security in Guatemala is rather tenuous now, particularly during Morales' continued state of siege. Due to this, I am not sharing the names of people or organizations. We were guided by the in-country consultant for AJWS. He wove his own story into the history of the armed conflict of Guatemala. The effects of the Cold War reached all the way to his village, and it was burned to the ground. The consultant and his family fled into the jungle, where they lived for seven months, moving every few days, and then into a camp in Mexico where they stayed for 12 years. He shared that only he, one brother, and his father survived their ordeal; other brothers, his grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins all perished. He left his work investigating war crimes in the hardest hit areas, the ones that had experienced “unbelievable” atrocities, to join the work of AJWS. He is the direct contact for 19

organizations funded through AJWS who are fighting for justice, equality, democracy, and basic rights throughout Guatemala.

Two other partners at an AJWS grantee organization told of their extraordinary and courageous work investigating and reporting on what is actually happening on the ground, rather than what's reported in the mainstream media. The AJWS grantee has a widespread network throughout the country which uses technology in innovative and brilliant ways. These two work tirelessly as journalists to seek justice and share the truth of life in Guatemala throughout the entire country. Their network of journalists risk their lives every day to share that truth and expose injustice. They do it because it is the only way to ensure the world knows what truth is. I want to share with you the words of Dr. Rabbi Aryeh Cohen. He was a professor of mine in rabbinical school, but was also going through his ordination at the same time I was, so it was an honor to share the *bima* with him at graduation in his dual roles as both teacher and student. He wrote:

There is a great word . . . in the Rabbinic tradition: taromet. The word taromet shares a root with the word for thunder: ra'am. Taromet is the reaction which is sanctioned by a court when a person has been harmed in a way that is not legally actionable, and yet she has been morally wronged. Taromet, or righteous rage, does not carry with it any legal remedy, aside from communal vindication in one's outrage. Therefore: righteous indignation.

The contemporary occurrence of taromet, is the moment when you recognize that your understanding of justice has run up against an immoral situation. When workers are legally paid a salary so low that they cannot afford to feed and shelter themselves. When undocumented immigrants and their children are exploited for their work but are disenfranchised politically, and ultimately criminalized. In whatever issue, taromet, righteous indignation, occurs when you are forced to compare your understanding of justice with the reality of a situation, and you find that the reality does not stand up to scrutiny.

At that moment you are faced with the next question. What am I willing to do about this? The answer to this question can be anything from "nothing" through clicking on an email to joining a demonstration, to voting, to participating in an act of civil disobedience. Deciding to take that action is the "Here I am" moment. The French Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, has suggested that the statement hineni signals an opening of oneself to the Other. "Here I am to respond to your suffering." The hineni or "here I am" moment is the moment at which you realize that the jarring dissonance between the reality of injustice and the demands of justice comprise an obligation for you to act. The hineni moment is the move from "wow this sucks, somebody should do something" to "I am one of the people who have to do something."

On Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the power of presence. I asked you to think about how you will answer the question of *Ayeka* – where are you – with *Hineini* – I am here, I am present, I am ready.

Today, on our day of eternal judgment, the *Yom HaDin*, I encourage you to affirm your answer. Are you here? In a world where we see injustice nearly every day, how will you take a stand? Will you work to combat homelessness in our own city? Will you join us to cook for Outside In each month helping to prepare meals for homeless youth and other marginalized people? Will you participate in Soup to the Streets in the winter months providing warm soup and sandwiches to tent cities? Will you take a stand and stand up for our environment? Will you share your voice against the crisis of the Rohingya people and other genocides in the work that Never Again Coalition does? Will you allow your conscience to be moved by the dire situation at our own borders, not just fighting for due process for asylum, but also to change our policies abroad so that the corrupt governments around the world, whose people are fleeing, will consider the lives and dignity of their own citizens and create countries people want to remain in instead of running from?

Hillel famously teaches us, also in *Pirkei Avot*: “If I am not for myself, who am I? If I am only for myself, who will be for me? And if not now, when?”

How can I stand with you? I encourage you to email me after the holiday and let me know what stand you will take. I’d be honored to connect you with others doing this work.

In this moment, we turn towards our community to hold one another as we recall the memories of those we have loved and who no longer walk with us physically on our journeys with *Yizkor*. The words of the memorial prayer read “In loving testimony to their lives, I pledge *tzedakah* to help perpetuate ideals important to them.” It is through our deeds, our moral courage to stand up for justice that our loved ones legacy lives on.

You don’t have to do it all, and in fact you can’t do it all. But you can summon the courage to act. Remember, moral courage isn’t about how many good deeds you can do. It’s about knowing that the task list before us is impossible, and starting anyway. We cannot retreat to the luxury of being overwhelmed.