

HOLDING UP THE TORCH

Yom Kippur

October 9, 2019 ✧ 10 Tishri 5780

Rabbi Jennifer R. Greenspan

Before I dive too deep into this sermon, I'd love to share a little background about myself for those of you I haven't met yet. I am from California. I grew up in the San Fernando Valley, a giant, sprawling suburb of Los Angeles. I went to UC Santa Cruz in Northern California to earn my bachelor's degree with a double major in Psychology and Feminist Studies. I then moved back to the San Fernando Valley where I worked for Camp Ramah in California for a few years before I began my Rabbinic studies at Ziegler (which is in Los Angeles, California). Like I said, I am from California.

Since arriving in Indianapolis in June, I have often been asked what has been the biggest culture shock. As it has not yet begun to snow, and as autumn seems only barely to be hinting at its arrival, I can still say that it is this: The cashier at the grocery store usually asks me how my day is going. And acts as though I should answer, and ask the same in return.

You see, in California, when I arrive at the check-out stand, I will hand over my reusable bags (which I brought with me so I don't have to pay 10c each for disposable ones) and the cashier will ask, "Did you find everything you were looking for today?"

Now, regardless of whether or not this is true, I will respond, "Yeah, thank you," and the remainder of the transaction will occur in silence until my bags are handed back to me stuffed full of my groceries. At this point one of us will say, "Have a great day," the other a quick, "You too, thanks!" and I will leave.

It will be a perfectly polite interaction, but I will not be asked how my day was.

I will not be asked if I did anything fun over the long weekend.

I will probably not even be asked if I am planning to make guacamole with my avocados, tomatoes, and onions. (Obviously).

So it is striking to me to be asked as often as I am, “How are you today?”

I am used to that really only being a question I hear from someone who is already a friend. Since I am new to town and still making new friends, it was surprising, even as it is nice to hear.

Did you know that in the Ancient Temple in Jerusalem, there was a system for asking people how they were doing? It was set up to make sure that those who were suffering would have the opportunity to see the faces of their community standing with them, over and over.

Whenever you entered the Temple, if you were doing basically fine, you would go in and circle the courtyard to the right. If you were struggling, you would go through the roundabout the wrong way, circling to the left. Each person facing the other way, as they came to you, would ask, “Mah Lakh?, How is it for you?”

And you would answer them honestly. “I am a mourner,” you might say. “I am cut off from my community.” “I am struggling to see what I need.” Each person would then look you in the eye and say, “May the one who dwells here in the Temple be in your heart and help you to hear the words of your friends with you. May they draw you close again.” Over and over again, your community would offer support. It was likely exhausting to share it every time, but you knew that that “How are you?” was a genuine question, because the person asking it already knew you’d need a support, a friend. And every other Israelite, seeing you circling the courtyard to the left, would become that friend you needed.¹

Imagine if that was the exchange you had every week at Market District! It would be too heavy, and with someone you may barely know. In the Temple, you trusted that the person you shared with was a friend, a fellow member of the community. Can you assume the same of the cashier at Ralphs, I mean, Kroger? Or do you just continue answering, “I’m fine thanks. How are you?”

¹ Mishnah Middot 2:2

It's as though, now that we have left the safety of the Temple, our "How are you?"s have lost their clarity, since you don't know if the person asking can actually tell that you're asking for support. Outside the Temple, we're no longer circling smoothly, looking fully into the face of our friends. We ask one another how they're doing, but, too often, we don't really mean it. We bounce off one another, instead of looking each other in the eye as we pass. We've started fumbling in the dark.

Toward the end of Deuteronomy, the final book of the Torah, there is a strange verse mixed amongst a series of curses that are to befall the Israelite people in the event that they don't follow all of God's commandments:

"You will grope around at noontime the way that a blind man gropes in the dark."²

What is this curse? All the others in the section are fairly straight forward—famine, drought, illness...what is this one about?

Rabbi Yosi Bar Halafta of the Talmud was also confused by this verse. "My whole life," he said, "I've struggled to understand the verse 'and you shall grope around at noontime the way that a blind man gropes in the dark.' Why should it matter to a blind man whether or not it's dark? He can't see anyway!"

Rabbi Yosi continued, "This verse bothered me until, one pitch black night, I was once walking alone and saw a blind man walking along with a torch in his hand.

I asked him, "Excuse me, Sir, why do you need this torch if you are blind?"

He answered, "So long as I carry this torch, other people can see me and they can save me from the pits and thorns and thistles."³

² Deuteronomy 28:29

³ Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Megillah 24b

What insight on the part of this blind man! Though he cannot directly benefit from the light of his torch, he knows that others around him can, and that when they do, they will help him, and he too will be safer. In fact, the rabbis quote this very story to prove that it is appropriate, even for a blind person, to recite a blessing thanking God for the sun, the moon, and other sources of light—even if he can't use their light on his own. This particular blind man has put up this torch as if to say, "Please ask me how I am, please help me."

How can we manage to have the same empathy for ourselves? How can we, when we realize that we cannot do something, can't get through something alone, put up a torch asking someone to come help us?

We live in a world where, ironically, we ask strangers at the supermarket how they are doing, but we keep up with our friends and family via social media, following them on Instagram, friending them on Facebook. We let ourselves only see the masks that they are willing to share with the world at large. We don't see the tears they shed when they have a bad day, we just see the trips they took to Disneyland with their extended family. We don't show the arguments that took place piling our family into the car on a Sunday afternoon, just the happily posed pictures with the pumpkins we picked out at the patch at the end of the day. We pretend we're walking right, even when we're not because we want our feed to look nice more than we want to admit that we need our friends' and family's love.

And so, I admire the blind man, someone who knows not only that he needs help, but he knows what another would need in order to help him. He knows that he can't use the torch, but if he offers it, someone else can use it to help both of them. I admire his courage to use it, to flag himself as vulnerable, his courage to beg others to come to his aid.

I will admit, though, I am even more fascinated by Rabbi Yosi in this story.

Because he was walking along in the dark and saw that someone else, also walking in the dark, was holding up a torch.

How on earth did Rabbi Yosi know that this man was blind? How did he see that this blind man was using the torch not for his own benefit, but so that another *could* benefit from it on his behalf? What made him look closer, to not just pass by the man with a torch on the street?

He must have looked him in the eye. He must have seen how the blind man walked in the world. He *noticed* that the torch was not a personal tool, but a plea for companionship. And as a sighted person also wandering in the dark, Rabbi Yosi offered help—and thus received it himself. Without the blind man's torch, he couldn't see either—but because he was able to face another's vulnerability and help, his own need was also answered.

BOTH were saved because the blind man asked for help. They needed one another. Just as we all need one another. As I indicated on Rosh Hashanah, we all have our limits, our own blindspots. But we are blessed that our blindspots are not all the same. What I am blind to is not the same as what you are blind to, and vice-versa. What I have experienced and learned from is not what you have experienced and learned from. If we combine both my experiences, lessons, and talents with yours, we can find the way together.

This reminds me of another parable, told by Rabbi Hayyim of Zans:

A man had been wandering about in a forest unable to find his way out. Finally, he saw another man approaching him at a distance and was filled with joy. "Now I will find out which is the right way out of this forest!" he said to himself. When they drew near, he asked the man, "Brother, will you please tell me the way out of the forest? I have been wandering about in here for several days, and I am unable to find a way out."

The other man said to him, "Brother, I do not know the way out either, for I, too, have been wandering in here for many days. But this much I can tell you: Do not go the way that I have gone, for I know that it is not the way. Now come, let us search for the way out together."

R Hayyim added, “So it is with us. The one thing that each of us knows is that the way we have already been going is not the way. But let us now join hands and look for the correct way together.”

The curse in Deuteronomy, which says that we will struggle in the daylight as a blind man struggles in the dark, means that we will stop engaging with one another, learning from one another; that we wouldn't share what our own experiences and struggles have taught us when we see another going through the same; that by the time we're ready to put up the torch, no one will be left to see it and help us; that when we ask someone how they are doing, we wouldn't look them in the face and mean it, inviting even an answer that includes pain.

On Yom Kippur, we wipe ourselves clean of our misdeeds and start anew. Let us forgive our past mistakes, but remember to share the lessons those mistakes have given us with one another. We don't yet know what the year ahead will hold. It will, God willing have much to be joyful for and to celebrate. And, most likely, it will also have much that will leave us feeling vulnerable and broken. Let's be there for one another. Let's reach a hand out to one another. Let's teach and share with one another. This year, let's mean it when we ask one another, “How are you today?”

All we have is one another. When we share our vulnerabilities, we can help one another. If you need help, put up a torch. When you struggle to get through a hard time, let your family and friends wander the forest with you. And when you pass a friend on the street, look them in the eye and check—they may be carrying a torch that's meant for you.

How are you doing today?