

It's All About You
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Yom Kippur Morning – October 5, 2022

A glance at recent headlines.
Hurricanes and flooding.
The Russian War in Ukraine.
Nationalist right-wing leaders being elected around the world.
The Mets in Atlanta.

Somehow, also, Lizzo playing a flute, and black people portraying mythical creatures like mermaids and elves.

And in this past year and throughout our lifetimes:

COVID.
The economy.
Climate Change.
School shootings.
Voting Rights.
Systematic Racism and Hate Crimes.
Police Violence.
Homophobia, Transphobia, Ableism, and other Hates.
The Rise of the Alt-Right in America and around the world.
Antisemitism.
Oppression of Immigrants and Refugees.
The Supreme Court.
Loss of Reproductive Rights.
Struggles in Israel in Government and in Peace.
Crime.
Hunger.
Homelessness.
Human Trafficking.
Domestic Abuse.
Poverty.
War.

I have to stop listing at this point. One could never stop, and I am sure I already missed an issue near to your heart.

A survey from the American Psychological Association showed that 63 percent of Americans found the future of the nation to be a very or somewhat significant source

of stress, with 59 percent of people calling this ‘the lowest point in US history that they can remember.’”¹

We know that easy access to news makes us more aware of the troubles near and far. Before the Internet, we had limited resources to learn about issues all over the planet. Today, just the Citizen app on my phone or checking any minor symptom on WebMD can keep us sufficiently terrified.

The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer in our Yom Kippur liturgy seems like a checklist of the world’s woes – Who shall live and who shall die. Who by fire, who by water, who by plague, who by war. Yom Kippur is often seen as a day of sadness, reflecting on our failures and on our struggles ahead. But today is a day of hope – it is full of possibility. We have the opportunity to make a change in ourselves. The liturgy tells us that God is waiting for us to turn away from our mistakes, to embrace *Teshuva*. We look for ways to care for others, show empathy, offer self-care, and find forgiveness. But in the face of such unrelenting trouble in the world, it is easy to give up. What can I do? What difference do I make? Why even bother?

On this Yom Kippur day, I want to focus on one idea. One message to hold onto as we navigate the struggles of the world. It’s all about you.

This is not some expectation that you have the solution to war, famine, or disease. But it is the reminder we often need that each of us makes a difference. Take Nils Bohlin, who none of us likely had ever heard of before. He was a mechanical engineer in Sweden who, while working at Volvo, invented the three-point seatbelt, saving millions of lives.

“If you save a single life, it is considered as if you have saved the whole world,” Talmud Sanhedrin famously tells us.² For Nils Bohlin, that is true. But what about all of us? We can’t all be Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa had the response for that. She said, “If you cannot feed a hundred people, feed one.”

“One person can make a difference, and everyone should try.”³ Sometimes we dismiss our actions as so small and irrelevant. Pirke Avot⁴ teaches us this: *mitzvah gorerert mitzvah*, every step towards good leads to a better world.

I often think of Mr. Rogers when I think of how one person makes a difference. I have shared stories about Fred Rogers in the past on the High Holy Days. Here’s one more. A five-year-old girl named Katie wrote Mr. Rogers a letter. She knew he would feed the fish in his aquarium during the show. She wrote, “Dear Mister Rogers, Please say when you are feeding your fish because I worry about them. I can’t see if you are feeding them, so please say you are feeding them out loud.” This may seem like an unusual request, but Katie’s father added a note: “Katie is blind,

and she does cry if you don't say that you have fed the fish." From that day forward, Mr. Rogers always narrated his actions saying, "Here you are, fish."⁵ How simple it is to be a compassionate friend.

It's all about you. Your actions *might* not change your life, but they can change someone else's. The phone call. The hug. The kind word on a difficult day. A smile. A favor. Just being acknowledged. We know these things make a difference even as we don't always make the effort to share them with the world around us.

It starts with one person. A little boy named Juan recently was separated from his father in a city park in Argentina. One man found him, comforted him, and put him on his shoulders so his dad would more easily see him. He started calling for the boy's father, "Eduardo, come and find Juan Cruz." Soon others in the crowd added their voices. The band playing in the park turned it into a song. "Eduardo, come and find Juan Cruz." Thanks to the entire community coming together, Juan Cruz was happily and tearfully reunited with his dad.⁶ It started with one person.

We can't all be Rosa Parks – but in some ways we can. "Rosa Parks was the queen mother of a movement whose single act of heroism sparked the movement for freedom, justice, and equality. Her greatest contribution is that she told us a regular person can make a difference."⁷ "Never worry about numbers," Mother Teresa further guided us. "Help one person at a time, and always start with the person nearest you."

Beginning to make a difference is as simple as being present and aware of the people around you. But to tackle some of the more significant issues facing our world, I turned to our Social Action Team at RTFH, who continually find opportunities to help others. They didn't solve the immigration crisis, but they worked with one Guatemalan family to help them find a home in Queens. They couldn't stop COVID, but they worked one-on-one with members of the community, helping them sign up for vaccines, get rides when needed, and they checked in over the days that followed.

The Social Action Team shared with me a list of dozens of ways individuals can make a difference. It won't solve homelessness or hunger, but it will mean something to that one person. Saving a single life is saving the entire world. It's all about you.

Some of their ideas are including donating food to support a food bank, which you can do right at RTFH at the table in the lobby. And then volunteer to help deliver that food. Sending postcards to encourage voting, a program our ToFHY Youth Group is doing. Joining the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center's local climate change initiative. Support Eagles Up to help veterans of the US Armed

Forces or Days for Girls by donating personal hygiene items to girls in developing nations. Visit a nursing home, as our junior choir does, and spend time with an isolated resident. Join a march on an issue that matters to you. RTFH went to the Celebrate Israel Parade and the Queens Pride Parade this past year. Become part of the Inclusion Team or the Racial Equity Team, or the Shalom Keshet LGBTQ Team right here at RTFH. It is easy to break into local politics – meetings are now open and available to share your voice on the issues that matter in your neighborhood. Work with the Caring Fund at RTFH to bring comfort to Temple families struggling with illness. Make sure you are an organ donor. And give blood as often as it is safe. There are so many things easily accessible and available here at Temple and beyond that will help you challenge the world's woes and even make you feel better. We're not expected to do all of them. But we all can do one of them.

Not sure where to get started? Put Sunday, March 12 on your calendar and come to the RTFH Mitzvah Day and Blood Drive. But don't wait that long. Midnight Run is Saturday, October 22. We reach out to the homeless of NYC in a powerful evening of caring. It is perfect for adults, teens, and families to help. We can't change it all, but we have to start somewhere. Make the choice to combat the darkness of the world's news with compassion and action. If not now, when? It's all about you.

Now I know what some people are thinking. On Rosh Hashanah, didn't I say, "It's *not* about you"? And just over a week later, I am saying, "It's *all* about you." To that, I have a story.

Rabbi Simcha Bunim lived in early 18th century Poland. He would put two pieces of paper in his jacket pocket. Each had a quote from Jewish tradition. In the left pocket, the paper read, "I am but dust and ashes."⁸ When he felt too proud and high on himself, he would reach into this pocket, take out this paper, and read it. In the right pocket, he put a piece of paper reading, "For my sake was the world created."⁹ When he was feeling disheartened and lowly, he'd reach into this pocket and take this paper out and read it.¹⁰

We are not one thing. We are the joining of two worlds. But always, it is about recognizing the needs of others. Sometimes we need to get out of our heads and ego and remember, "It's not about you." Sometimes we need to embrace the difference we can make in the world and remember, "It's all about you."

We must recognize the human beings around us. In this new year, this is our mission. This is what will give us strength to combat the overwhelming world, the compassion to fill our lives with caring.

It can be hard to remember this task in day-to-day life. To help you out, I've created a magnet with both phrases side-by-side. Take one on your way out of services today. Put it on your refrigerator so that multiple times a day, you are reminded, It's not about you. It's all about you.

Every life you positively impact makes this a better world, you a better person, and makes a difference. Let's get started.

¹ www.psychalive.org/state-world-overwhelms/

² Sandhedrin 37a.

³ Attributed to John F. Kennedy. Likely originated with Jacqueline Kennedy.

⁴ Pirke Avot 4:2

⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=isqG-byty_Q

⁶ twitter.com/tansuyegen/status/1567187977025081346

⁷ Marc Morial, thisisadulthood.com/100-quotes-making-a-difference/

⁸ Genesis 18:27

⁹ Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

¹⁰ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim Later Masters*