

KOL NIDRE DRASH 5780
Our Sanctuary in this Inferno: Rabbi Arielle Lekach-Rosenberg
Shir Tikvah
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As an organizer in Seattle in the mid-2000s, friends and I would gather around blank pieces of poster paper and would try to draw the world we wished we lived in. We gave ourselves total freedom in our imaginings: What would the world look like if we were totally free? And we would draw as much as we could, trying to draw ourselves into new possibilities.

There were days where I could imagine boldly and draw the world of new possibilities closer. But more often than not, the exercise left me frustrated by my own limited imagination, my inability to be more clear about what the world needed more of. I could name what was going wrong, but I struggled to put clear images on what it going right would look like.

Our Torah and haftara readings on Yom Kippur invite us into that exploration. In a subtle way, through stories and prophecy, our Torah invites us to spend this long day dreaming big and clear: what are you going to do with your life? What are you willing to do to bring healing to this broken world?

Our Torah reading today begins as Cain, the first person born in exile, kills his brother Abel and refuses to take responsibility for his actions. *הַשֹּׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי* -- am I my sibling's guardian? he famously asks. As a punishment, he is cast out of his family's home. *נָעַד וַתְּהִי בְּאֶרֶץ* - he is destined to be an exile and wanderer on the face of the earth.

Just a few p'sukim - verses - later, we learn that Cain settles in Eretz Nod, a name that shares the same root as his curse: he settles literally in the Land of Wandering. Rashi imagines *בְּאֶרֶץ שֹׁכֵל הַגּוֹלִים* *דְּנִידִים נִשְׁ*: that this is land where exiles wander.

And, teaches the text, while wandering this land of displaced people and displacement, of perpetual movement and new possibilities, Cain settles in the Land of Nod and builds Torah's first city.

The Torah teaches that this first city was full of innovators and creators: the descendants of Cain, according to Torah, invented the practice of sleeping in tents, rotating pastures for flocks, created the flute and the lyre, figured out how to use copper and iron. Our commentators can't decide what to do with these inhabitants of the first city. They write: yes, they filled the streets with music and art...but maybe they were idol worshippers! They innovated agricultural practices and created new tools...but didn't they just work with iron to be able to make terrifying weapons to kill people? They opened the doors to new paradigms of life...but did we mention they are idol worshippers?!

Our commentators can't decide whether this first city is a city of beauty or destruction, creativity or danger. They are wary of the city's founder: how could they trust the creations of the descendants of Torah's first murderer? How could they believe in the generative possibilities of the descendants of someone who asked "Hashomer achi anochi?" "Am I my sibling's protector?" as a way of distancing himself from responsibility?

They weren't sure: did Cain do teshuva for his violence against his brother, for his dismissal of his responsibility to his family, to his community? Did Cain found the city on the principal of "haShomer achi anochi?", creating a city whose inhabitants would ask the question "Am I my sibling's protector?" -- a question that rejected the idea that they could care for, safeguard, the lives of those around them? Or did the inhabitants of the city undertake teshuva for Cain's violence, turning his question into a heartfelt declaration: *shomer achi anochi*. I am a protector of my sibling, I accept responsibility and guard the sanctity and dignity of the lives of those around me.

What a difference punctuation makes.

Jane Jacobs, in her foundational book *Life and Death of Great American Cities*, wrote in 1961 about the nature of safety in urban space. In gentrifying neighborhoods in New York City, she noticed that there were buildings where, at the sight of trouble on the sidewalk, neighbors would stick their heads out of their highrises and call down to the troublemakers below. She tells the story of a young girl resisting going with an older man on the streets of New York. Suddenly voices call out from above, *Hey you! Leave her alone!* and the girl was able to go about her business. Divine intervention it was not, or at least, not literal divine intervention. Rather, the voices of building residents, the active witness of many neighbors, interrupted the threat of violence, disrupted the smooth flow of events.

Jacobs contrasts these buildings of active witness with buildings where individuals were paid to guard property. In these buildings, no one stuck their heads out of windows, no one called out to passerbys below to direct them if they saw people who were lost or waiting at out-of-use busstops.

As neighborhoods gentrified, as people were displaced, more and more buildings disconnected from the streets, neighbors disconnected from one another. The smooth flow of city life itself has become a barrier for showing up effectively and spontaneously in each other's lives. Our city holds this same ambivalence: it is simultaneous the site of tremendous connection and disconnect, apathy, injustice.

Italo Calvino wrote in his powerful book, *Invisible Cities*:

The inferno of the living is not something that *will* be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.¹

Calvino's second option requires not simply awareness but risk, putting something profound at stake. To recognize the not-inferno in the midst of oppression and struggle, to recognize it and make it endure, requires the willingness to open, to act, to transform. To do teshuva for our complicity in the inferno, to be committed to uproot, to unlearn, to open to new possibilities.

We can find a model for the not-inferno, for how a city chooses solidarity over indifference/wickedness of the social fabric in this afternoon's haftara reading of the book of Jonah. We read in the book of Jonah of the great city of Nineveh making space for the not-inferno, as they undertake collective teshuvah after God threatens them with destruction:

Jonah travels to Nineveh, a city so vast it took three days to travel across. He hadn't even been in the city a day, calling out

“Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

before the city undertook a huge teshuva project:

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

¹ Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 165

And he had the word cried through Nineveh: “By decree of the king and his nobles: No people or beast—of flock or herd—shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water!”²

After all, thought the king: מִי־יִוְדַע יְשׁוּב וְנַחַם הָאֱלֹהִים Who knows, maybe God will do teshuva and have compassion on us.³

I love this image: king and beast, grownups and babies, fasting and atoning together. I imagine a donkey looking mournful and wearing sackcloth, which I really thought was in Torah, but apparently was just my imagination. Of course God forgave Nineveh! How could God do anything other than pardon adorable barnyard creatures engaging in acts of repentance?

So this must be the lesson we’re meant to learn this holy season: dress our pets up in sackcloth, don’t eat, follow the king’s decrees, and all will be well.

Shana tova.

This can’t be it, folks. This morning’s haftara deepens the lesson of teshuva, for as the prophet Isaiah famously declares:

This is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke
To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When
you see the naked, to clothe them,
And not to ignore your own kin.⁴

Let’s imagine the entire city of Nineveh engaging in that sort of transformative fast: the king dismantles the debtor’s dungeon, the Nineveh police force disbands, Nineveh banks redistribute wealth, Nineveh corporations turn themselves into collectives and stop relying on fossil fuels. The city of Nineveh dissolves its borders and developers who had been flipping homes cease their actions and repent publicly. Families in Nineveh open their homes to those who seek sanctuary. People block the streets from vehicles and hold potlucks every night where all are welcome to eat and connect. Nineveh neighbors convene thoughtful conversations that last long into the night where they dream together like they had never dreamed before about what life might look like if they worked together.

The donkey still wears sackcloth, because it was adorable and why not.

Read with Isaiah, the residents of Nineveh transform themselves through their actions, staying accountable to one another, releasing themselves from the habits of alienation and apathy, making manifest liberation. I wonder: did they even need God’s forgiveness after this full-body teshuva or did their new behavior birth their new chapter? They claimed stake in each other’s lives, remaking their city. They declared: *shomrei acheinu anachnu* - we are our sibling’s protectors.

And so we, sitting here in white, engaged in various forms of fasting and reflection, get to be inspired by the Nineveh justice fast. We get to absorb Isaiah’s challenge into our bodies and use these hours of prayer and reevaluation to awaken ourselves into dreaming that galvanizes us into action. As we move through liturgy and ritual, let’s take this time to really reflect and imagine, drawing a more just

² Jonah 3:7-8

³ Jonah 3:9

⁴ Isaiah 58:6-7

world into being. These services function as one big piece of poster paper spread out before us, the words of the prayers our markers, Torah providing the invitation into visioning:

How boldly can each of us vision a transformed world in its glorious specificity? What do homes look like in this reality? Who lives in our homes? How do we relate to our neighbors? Does injustice exist in this more free world? Do borders? Does the internet? How do we respond to challenge? What do our bodies feel like in that reality? How do we relate to each other? How do we pay attention to the world around us?

How big can we dream?

Breathe in the freedom of all that.

What action, what risks, are we willing to take to bring this world into being?

As we approach the 2020 election, it is more important than ever that we take seriously the potential of our action - individual and collective - and the impact of our inaction. My fervent prayer is that there is major change this election but as we evaluate our actions and ready ourselves for this year to come, we must think seriously about what actions we will take, how we will organize ourselves and our cities, *regardless* of who takes power in 2020. The structures of oppression in our society preexist Trump and our work for justice, our mechanisms of teshuva and transformation need to be in place no matter who takes power. As we lead up to 2020, we must ask ourselves: how will our cities serve as organisms of resistance? How will we each work to keep each other safe?

We are a sanctuary congregation in a sanctuary city and this is something to be proud of and to take seriously. A sanctuary cannot simply be declared. It must be enacted. We create the condition of sanctuary with our practices. We must recognize that, especially if Trump wins the election in 2020, we will need to deepen and make even more expansive and concrete our embodiment of sanctuary, take more audacious, strategic, accountable and significant action.

Will we take action to protect those whose Temporary Protective Status (TPS), was suspended during Trump's first term, if they are not reinstated? Will we work together to create alternative structures of social services for those whose pathways to citizenship are foreclosed by nationalist politicians? Will we imagine new modes of transportation, open to everyone, if we are not able to achieve drivers licenses for all in our states? Will our cities begin naturalizing people who have lost hope of achieving citizenship in our country?

What will our concrete, courageous contribution to this prayerful resistance look like, recognizing that the answers to these questions impact so many in our city, in our community?

Dear ones, to quote Italo Calvino, the inferno is where we live every day, it's what we form by being together. We can dismantle it by our conscious, careful teshuva: dismantling it with concrete, strategic action; by sharing bread with the hungry, And taking the poor into our homes. To grow inside the inferno a sanctuary, whole enough to contain the whole world.

My wish for us is that we not be caught unprepared. That we spend this next year organizing to make manifest the system that would be more liveable in 2020 and beyond. My deep wish for us this new year is that we push to imagine outside the limits of our current system, undertaking new action, new strategies, that we become shomrei acheinu, protectors of our neighbors and siblings, with courage and audacity.

As I forced myself to think concretely about what preparation is necessary leading up to this next election, I felt just like I did when I sat in front of that poster paper with markers and friends in Seattle: I felt surges of terror and despair that my imagination wasn't expansive to be equal to this demanding moment. I commit to you to not let my personal fear get the better of me. I commit to you to keep challenging myself to dream and to keep building relationships and experiences that will allow my imagination to stay alive, my body active and in service. I hope you'll join me in that commitment. Let us keep rising above the limits of our imaginations, in action and in love.

We learn in Talmud that

A talmid haham (Torah scholar) is not allowed to live in a city that does not have these 10 things: a beit din (law court) [that metes out punishments]; a tzedakah fund [that is collected by two people and distributed by three]; a synagogue; a bath house; a bathroom; a doctor; a craftsman; a blood-letter; a butcher; and a teacher of children.⁵

Our tradition is clear: there is no meaningful Jewish life alone. There must be critical mass, and that critical mass needs to be organized. May we continue dreaming, with whole, hot hearts, of our liberated world. May our gristle and bone make that world manifest, little by little, by doing teshuva in our court and shul, in our (all-gender) bathrooms and (ICE-free) hospitals. May we be scholars of righteousness, may we insist again and again: *shomrei acheinu anachnu*: we are siblings, that we take notice of each other, that we will protect each other, guard each other, hold each other fiercely and with love.

May we merit to heal the four corners of our world with our action, with our tenderness, with our belief and enactment of transformation.

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Dreaming Towards 2020
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⁵ Sanhedrin 17b