

Almost five years ago to the day, I was honored to give the introduction to the Yom Kippur Haftarah for the Tikkun Olam Coordinating Team, also known as TOCT. This year, once again, as the current TOCT chair, I am again honored to do so.

I decided to start this introduction by retelling the same story I told five years ago, still very appropriate and meaningful for this haftarah. I grew up in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn, populated at that time mainly by first generation Jewish Americans whose parents had mostly immigrated to America from Eastern European countries. On my street there were three large apartment buildings crowded together, and virtually all the families in these apartments were Jewish. Our own mini-Jewish community.

My parents weren't very religious, but my grandfather was, and he would take me on the high holidays to a small shul in our neighborhood. After morning services, my friends and I would get restless, and we would go "synagogue hopping" to visit our other friends at the many diverse synagogues in the neighborhood.

One of our wanderings took place on Yom Kippur, in the middle of the afternoon. My friends and I would meander down to the local White Castle hamburger store, a very popular little white hut located at Empire Blvd and Utica Avenue (for those who know Crown Heights) that sold relatively small 15 cent hamburgers. There, we would every year find what seemed like hundreds of Jewish men dressed in their Yom Kippur finery crowded into the store buying one, two, three, maybe even four hamburgers! I, the virtuous one, would not succumb to this temptation (this is true) but was of course horrified by all this. What was the world coming to? To my young mind, this was clearly a major victory for hypocrisy and deceit.

Today, looking back, my judgments are much softer, especially after rereading Isaiah's Haftarah for today. I now realize that fasting on Yom Kippur for the entire day is not the only, nor the major way to judge piety on the holiday. Please don't misunderstand me – I'm not

advocating that we don't fast today! Fasting is good for its sense of sacrifice, for its avoidance of temptation for at least one day, for creating discipline, and for helping to put your life in perspective, to compare your life to others who go hungry every day. But I am now much more focused on the following words of Isaiah that we read in today's haftarah:

*"This is the fast I desire:
to unlock the chains of wickedness,
and untie the knots of servitude.
to let the oppressed go free,
their bonds broken.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
and welcome the homeless into your home.
When you see the naked, to clothe them.
All people are your kin:
do not ignore them."*

Isaiah's words suggest that fasting is not enough, nor even the most important thing we do on Yom Kippur – we also need to reconsider the moral and ethical foundation of our lives and how to better perform concrete acts of service to those in need. In other words, we need to become better activists for social justice! This raises some really important questions we should be asking ourselves at this time of repentance and atonement, such as: What actions did we take during the previous year to help others? Did we do enough? As Isaiah asks: Did we help "loose the chains of injustice"? Did we do "Tikkun Olam"?

No matter how much "helping to heal the world" you did this past year, I hope you will consider finding some ways to do more! There are always the simple things we can do more of on our own – find a way to be kinder and more supportive of others, listen more, better support a charity of your choice, or become more of an activist for political change that will move the world towards greater social justice.

But, in addition, our goal at TOCT is to encourage the GJC community to do more Tikkun Olam together. We say proudly that there are now so

many GJC members already involved in Tikkun Olam initiatives and very many possibilities for involvement. For example, the Men's Club invites GJC members to help pack and distribute food to the needy here in Philadelphia. GJC members also work with students at Henry or Houston, two of our local elementary public schools, help advocate for or resettle refugees coming into the US, develop and support anti-racism initiatives, and work with POWER, an organization consisting of numerous faith-based organizations in the Philadelphia region and beyond that focuses on redressing many important social justice issues, such as school funding and wage inequality.

GJC also has a "Green Team" that has raised money to put solar panels on the GJC roof and is involved in other initiatives that deal with climate change. We have a Kol Nidre food drive and collect winter coats for migrants coming to Philadelphia. And, although this is no longer an explicit initiative at GJC, each of us can regularly purchase fair trade food items and gifts to help provide decent incomes to people around the world.

To keep up with all these possible options and more, we are in the process of updating our section of the GJC website so you can regularly scan it for Tikkun Olam activities. You can also put your name on the Tikkun Olam list-serve in order to receive regular (but not too frequent) information about Tikkun Olam opportunities. You can contact me or other members of our Tikkun Olam Team if you are interested in discussing current Tikkun Olam activities or in starting your own Tikkun Olam initiative! We will help and support you in this endeavor.

We on TOCT wish a good Yom Tov to all who are part of this wonderful GJC community. May we all be inscribed in the book of life during this coming year and, as we begin the new year, 5784, may we all take to heart Isaiah's words to make repairing and healing the world one of our core goals. I hope you will consider the following quote as a Tikkun Olam mantra for yourself, attributed to the Chinese philosopher Lao Tse: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step". As part of your reflection on this day, decide to take that single step – or maybe even two - towards greater healing of the world through the GJC

Talk: Intro to Haftarah

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Elliott Seif, Current Chair, Tikkun Olam Coordinating Team (TOCT)

Germantown Jewish Centre

community, on your own, or both during the coming year. As Margaret Mead once said “Never doubt that a group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

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