

Sermon for Yom Kippur
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Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
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“Generosity – The Antidote For The Plague of Selfishness”

In the spring of 2003, Mohamad Kalyesubula, a father of six, lay on a bed in a small clinic in Entebbe, Uganda. Like millions of Africans suffering from the advanced stages of AIDS, Mohamad was wasting away. He ate little. He battled constant fevers. He had been confined to bed for almost a year.

But that morning, the clinic had a special guest: US President George W. Bush and his wife Laura.¹

When President Bush came to office in January of 2001, over 28 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa were infected with HIV. Dr. Mark Dybul, former United States Global AIDS Coordinator, said that in Botswana, “At one point, 75 percent of pregnant women had HIV... Most diseases kill the very old and the very young. But this disease was killing the most productive and reproductive parts of society. So not only were many households run by orphans, but entire villages were run by orphans, because everyone [else] was dead.”²

“I have a dream,” Mohamad told President Bush as he lay on his hospital bed. “One day, I will come to the United States.”

President Bush believed deeply in the principle that every life has dignity and value. “I considered America a generous nation,” he said, “with a moral responsibility to do our part to help relieve poverty and despair,” he wrote. And so, under President Bush’s direction, the administration developed PEPFAR, The President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, which constituted the largest international health initiative ever to combat a specific disease. A wide bipartisan majority in the House of Representatives approved the first five-year \$15 billion plan, by a vote of 375-41.

Since its inception, PEPFAR is credited with having saved 26 million lives and enabling 7.8 million babies to be born without HIV infection.³ Mohamad was one of those 26 million lives. Three months after meeting President Bush, Mohamad received his first dose of antiretroviral medicine. Eventually he was able to get out of bed, and took a job at the clinic where he had recovered his own health. In the summer of 2008, he boarded a plane to Washington, DC, to join President Bush as he signed the renewal of PEPFAR, a

¹ George W. Bush, *Decision Points*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2010, pp. 333-334.

² <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/an-oral-history-of-pepfar-how-a-dream-big-partnership-is-saving-the-lives-of-millions>

³ <https://www.state.gov/pepfar-latest-global-results-factsheet-dec-2024/>

bill doubling America's commitment to fight HIV/AIDS. He had returned to life. His dream had come true.

I think about PEPFAR on this Yom Kippur because I think today, we are suffering from a different kind of epidemic. This is not a new variant of COVID or HIV. But this virus is destroying us on the inside, and that has the power to destroy our very society. It is called *Anochiyut* – Selfishness.

Anochiyut comes from the Hebrew word *Anochi*, which means “me.” *Anochiyut* is the egotistical self-centered infatuation with me, myself, and I. *Anochiyut* creates callouses that harden our hearts and our souls, rendering us incapable of empathy, sensitivity, caring, or love. It makes us myopic almost to the point of blindness, so that all we can see is the immediate circle around ourselves. It causes intense hearing-loss, so that we become deaf to any voices outside of our own. Symptoms usually induce greed, arrogance, and conceit, and can often include delusions, anger, and rage.

Pharaoh in Egypt teaches us how dangerous is *Anochiyut*. Despite all of Moses' entreaties, and the devastation wrought by plague after plague, the Torah describes Pharaoh as *Kaved-Lev* – bearing a hardened heart - arrogant, stubborn, unfeeling, and selfish. Pharaoh's egotism and vanity cause his heart to be stopped up with hubris and conceit. And that hard-hearted, angry, callous disregard for anything but himself, his own power and privilege, ultimately leads him and his people to utter ruin.

The same disease that devastated Pharaoh and Egypt threatens to destroy us, our nation and people as well. Our society is sick with the hard-hearted, callous selfishness of *Anochiyut*. It fills Facebook posts, Instagram feeds, and Tik Tok videos. The smug self-righteousness of the selfish and self-satisfied pours forth from the mouths of podcasters and politicians, professors and pundits. We demean and demonize and dehumanize people, labeling them “libtards” and “fascists”, “illegals” or “deplorables.” Our society is so sick that many now condone violence, cheer murderers, and celebrate assassins.

Anochiyut and hard-heartedness is dangerously contagious. Our culture is awash in nastiness and spite, fear-mongering and xenophobia, cruelty and vindictiveness. The virus travels on airwaves and is transmitted in conversation. Our hearts continue to harden, and our ever-growing arrogance and hubris causes us to be more condescending, more callous, and more hateful. As *Anochiyut* strips away our humanity, and quickens our spiritual demise, we become bad human beings, ever more inhuman and inhumane.

When our ancestors left Egypt, they too were infected with *Anochiyut*. And who could blame them? For centuries their daily mission was simply to survive, to evade the task-masters whip. It's understandable that they too had to harden their hearts, to ensure they would not break from the brutal battering they endured physically and spiritually each and every day.

So when they finally emerged into freedom, the Holy One modeled for them a different way of being: *Nedivut* – generosity.

God provided manna for them to eat, water from a rock to drink, and the generous gift of Torah – of covenantal love, holy presence and moral guidance.

The Holy One then asked them to construct a Tabernacle, a *Mishkan*, a Tent of Meeting where they could encounter God's presence in their community. What's interesting to me is what matters to God in the construction of the *Mishkan*.

This was the first national project of the Jewish people. Up until then, each Israelite was only concerned with their individual needs – each pitched their own tent, each person lived apart and alone. The construction of the Tabernacle was the first invitation God offered our people to think beyond the boundaries of their own individual selves, and to join together to build something together.

What was important to God was not how quickly they could get the project done, nor how cost-effective they could make the structure, nor how efficiently it could be accomplished. The one and only thing that mattered to God was that it would be built with generosity.

God commands: "*VaYikchu Li Trumah Meiet Kol-Ish Asher Yidevenu Libo* – take for Me gifts from anyone whose heart is so moved."⁴ If the Israelites were willing to open their hearts with generosity, if they would give freely of their resources, their time, and their talent; if they would collaborate and cooperate with one another, then the dwelling they built would become a *Mikdash* – a holy place, "*V'Shachanti B'Tocham* – and I, [God], will dwell in their midst."⁵

Rabbi Meir Leibush, known as the Malbim, taught that the verse actually means that God would dwell not literally in the *Mishkan*, but *B'Tocham* – in and among the people. The point is that in building the Tabernacle with willing generous hearts, together they would build a sanctuary, a holy place not only on the outside but in their hearts. Nothing has changed since then. We too are asked to build a sanctuary for God in our hearts. And the way we perform this inner construction work is by perfecting our capacity for generosity.

It is so easy to fall into a pattern of selfishness and self-concern. Living is hard. Resources are scarce. The world we live in can feel precarious and out of control: who by fire and who by water; who by war and who by beast; who by famine and who by drought; who by earthquake and who by plague ... The vicissitudes of life batter the spirit and assault the soul. They trigger our deepest fears, and spread anxiety, worry, and concern. The hurts we carry in our bodies, our souls, and our spirits - all of them make us susceptible to *Anochiyut*, creating the callouses that harden our hearts, that make us turn inward, that push us to circle our wagons, and push away the world.

⁴ Exodus 25:2

⁵ Exodus 25:8

Hillel expressed it best in Pirke Avot: *Im Ayn Ani Li Mi Li* – If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?⁶

Our personal angst has seeped into our nation's soul. Our nation has embraced an ethic of efficiency – where the most important value is how to skate by with the least possible investment of resources, shrinking our vision as to what is our moral responsibility or duty. In the name of efficiency, we have cut billions of dollars from programs that provide healthcare and food assistance to the poor, billions of dollars in grants for disaster relief, billions of dollars in cancer research, billions of dollars in foreign assistance to the most needy on the planet, including a \$3 billion reduction in spending for PEPFAR this year. Thousands of people have been cast out of work after years of service to our country, most with no severance and little to no warning. We are transforming the moral fabric of our nation to one where in the name of efficiency, selfishness, callousness, and greed reign supreme. *Anochiyut* threatens to destroy the soul of our nation.

But Hillel also taught: *U-CheShani L'Atzmi, Mah Ani* – But if I am only for myself, what am I?⁷

This Day of Atonement calls us to get back to basics, to think about what really ought be the foundation on which we build the *Mishkan* in our hearts, and how we build our world itself into a *Mikdash* – a sacred place where holiness abounds.

Rabbi Akiva and his colleague Ben Azzai have a debate as to which is the most important verse in the Torah.⁸ Rabbi Akiva argues it should be the famous verse from this afternoon's Torah portion, in which we learn in the holiness code: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself".

This of course makes sense. Opening one's heart up in love, seeking to be so open that one literally feels what someone else is feeling, to see the world through that person's eyes, to share in the lived experience of the other – is this not the key to all morality?

But Ben Azzai suggests a different verse, from the beginning of the fifth chapter in the book of Genesis: "When God created humankind, [humanity] was made in the image of God." Why is this verse superior? Because it teaches something fundamentally even more important – not only that all life is of ultimate and infinite value, but that we all extend from the same creator. What makes me – me, and what makes you – you, comes from the same holy, sacred stuff. We may be different in every way possible – we may be different genders, we may be drawn to love different people in different ways, we may have different ethnic backgrounds, we may speak different languages, we may follow different pathways of faith and belief, we may be swayed by different political philosophies, but at our most basic fundamental roots – we are all family. We are kin, sharing a duty to be mutually responsible one for another. As Moses teaches us in the

⁶ Pirke Avot 1:14

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Sifra Kedoshim 4:12

book of Deuteronomy: “If there is a needy person among you, one of your kindred in any of your settlements ... do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kindred.”⁹

Religious scholar Karen Armstrong teaches: “The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.”¹⁰

Like the *Mishkan*, a holy society is built on a foundation of generosity - the generous contributions of precious materials, the generous contributions of precious talents, the generous contributions of precious time, the generous contributions of precious hearts.

In fashioning our republic, the founders of our nation were much less interested in the question of “what will make us the most money?” and much more interested in the question of “what kind of arrangement will produce a noble and generous people?”¹¹

We need to rebuild our nation and ourselves on a foundation of generosity – of decency, of care, of kindhearted compassion, empathy, and love. Individually and collectively, we must learn to look at each with generosity - with curiosity and genuine interest, not as enemies but as kin. Democracy depends on our capacity to collaborate with each other, to extend ourselves beyond the boundaries of difference, to care enough about ourselves that we stand by our convictions, but care enough about each other that we willingly compromise to move forward toward the common good.

We need to be a people who look out at the world with generosity – so when we look across the ocean to a continent ravaged with disease, we provide them with the medicine and resources to survive and to thrive.

We need to be a people who look at the stranger with generosity – remembering the Torah’s requirement that “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love them as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” We need to be generous enough to make room in our hearts and in our cities and towns for those fleeing persecution in foreign lands, who seek, like we did in generations gone by, a chance to live the American dream.

We need to be a people that enforces its laws with generosity, vigilantly protecting us from those who come with malice and seek us harm, that defends itself and keeps order with courage but also with compassion, with strength but also with decency, with

⁹ Deuteronomy 15:7

¹⁰ <https://charterforcompassion.org/sign-the-charter.html>

¹¹ “The Difficulty of Imagining Other People” by Elaine Scarry in *For Love of Country?* by Martha Nussbaum. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, p. 109.

determination but with also with dignity, enforcing the law by ensuring the due process of law.

Nedivut, open-hearted generosity, must become our way being, grounded in love and understanding, secured with conviction and compassion. If that is where we start, then we can begin to close the gaping wounds of division and discord, and begin to heal from our affliction of egotistical callousness and self-centeredness. It was generosity that brought millions like Mohamad Kalyesubula back to life. It is generosity that will bring our society back to life. It is generosity that will bring us back to life, that will enable us to transform our hearts and our world into sacred, holy places where we will dwell together with God and each other as one.