

“The world as it is and the world as it should be...”¹

The hot cocoa was just the way I liked it - sweet and chocolaty - the rising steam worked its way up from the cup to my nose as I slowly sipped, careful not to burn my tongue. A brief rush of warmth enveloped my small frigid body – for a moment – a brief moment – the shivering ceased. While the small cup of hot chocolate had the power to mask the cold but for a moment, it did not hold the power to allow me to forget where I was.... at the age of five – I proudly held my sign as high as I could - FAIR WAGES, FAIR HOURS, FAIR BENEFITS for PFT local #3! It was January, as my father recently reminded me, and he along with thousands of other Philadelphia public school teachers were on strike.

That winter I learned for the first time about the tension between the world as it and the world as it should be. The world in which our family and my father’s colleagues lived was one of uncertainty. A world in which the work days started earlier and ended later for the same pay – the world as it is - and a world in which teachers like my father who dedicated their careers to public school education were earning salaries that forced them to work other jobs - the world as it is. On the other hand somewhere, off in the future, existed another world – the world as it should be – a world for which we were fighting– fair wages, fair hours - fair benefits.

¹Thank you to Rabbi Jonah Pesner, Rabbi Dara Frimmer, Elana Kogan and Nick O’Donnell who helped me at various stages throughout the writing process. I am indebted to my loving wife Rachel – thank you for your honesty and for listening to this sermon over and over again.

Many of you may have heard me tell this story before in a variety of contexts, a story so central to who I am as a person and a rabbi. However, it's only now as an adult with a child of my own - nearly three decades after that cold long winter – that I look back on the realities, the stresses and the anguishes my parents faced and truly understand the lessons they taught me, my brother and my sister. They taught us that when we are not satisfied with the world that we live in it, when the world as it is seems so far away from the world as it should be then we have a sacred obligation to work towards bridging the gap between the two. My parents, and all of the Philadelphia school teachers, taught me that in order to bridge that gap between the two worlds, we can not do it alone – we need each other to help accomplish this holy work. Their power, our power, comes from our relationships with one another and it's those relationships that allow us act powerfully together! That winter my parents, my family and thousands of other teachers and their families, did indeed bridge the gap between the world as it and the world as it should be! My parents taught me that we should not be willing to suffer alone and that sometimes you just have no choice but to stand on the picket lines in the cold.

The tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be is nothing new - it's as ancient as the Torah itself. In Deuteronomy, as the Israelites stand poised to enter the Land of Israel we read the following words: “There shall be no needy among you!” How could this be – could God really make such an audacious statement to the people Israel and for that matter to all of us? Can you imagine such a world - a world in which each and every person's basic needs are met – could there be such a time, such a place? As

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perplexing as this sounds – the Torah complicates matters even further when but a few short verses later we read “For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land” First, God proclaims proudly that there will never be any one in need - and then in the next breath God cries out just the opposite - there will always be people in need.

Two verses – two worlds. On one hand - a world redeemed. Imagine for a moment a world in which we didn’t have to worry about weather or not we would be able to afford college tuition for our kids, a world where our elders, as a rule, aged with pride and dignity, or a world where our teens didn’t have to face the stresses and pressures that often lead them to self-destructive and abusive behaviors, a world where we weren’t becoming more and more isolated from our neighbors – can you picture such a world? – Could you dream for but a moment about the world - perhaps as it should be?

On the other hand a world that sounds more like the one in which you and I live. A world in which thousands of responsible families who planned and saved can be left wondering how they are now going to pay for college as MEFA remains unable to extend new loans, a world in which our deteriorating environment clearly has a lasting effect on our health and the health of our children, a world in which decisions made by a handful of people have drastic effects on our lives financially and professionally, and a world in which a straight A student in Sudbury can take her own life, after suffering alone in silence. This is a world fragmented, and broken – a world in opposition to one in which God declared there shall be no needy among you!

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These two worlds spoken of by God in such close proximity to one another in the Torah are there in order to teach something - something you and I face each and everyday of our lives – *the tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be*. The world as it is - “the demanding set of real circumstances” – the reality that we did not create but are none the less a part of – the real world.² Yet, God gives us hope that there can indeed be a world as it should be – a vision for the future based on our core Jewish values of justice and compassion, based on our own hopes and our own dreams. Two worlds – one broken one whole, one here and one there one fragmented and one redeemed

The Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe are a special time of year when we as Jews turn soulfully towards *teshuvah*, (repentance), a time of year when we reflect upon the person we were and look forward towards the person we would like to be. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur teach us that the tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be also exists internally within each and every one of us. Rabbi Soloveitchik understood this when we taught “God at the end of days will not judge us on who we were in life or who we wanted to be - but rather how large of a gap there was in between the two!”³

² Edward T. Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*, Page 27

³ I am grateful to my teacher and mentor Jeannie Appleman for teaching me these very powerful words.

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He knew that we all have personal aspirations as to the people we want to be – this is the world as it should be...yet he recognized the realities of the world in which we live – the truth about human nature – that in spite of our best of intentions we often find it impossible to meet the dreams and goals with which we have set for ourselves – this is the world as it is. The High Holidays, according to Rabbi Soloveitchik, are there for us to work on bridging the gap between the person whom we are and the person we know we can be. This change, the closing of the gap is possible and within our reach - yet, we know that in order to be successful in our personal lives we can not do it alone.

It's the relationships with our friends and family that help move us towards the people we know we can be – we can't become a better person without the help of others. Just as this is the time of year when we aim to do good work on ourselves internally, so too this is the time of year when we must aim to do good work on the world in which we live. Just as we can not allow ourselves to remain unchanged and unmoved by the process of *teshuvah*, so too we can not allow ourselves to be overcome by the feelings of powerlessness and cynicism and continue to live only in the world as it is. We must reach and work towards moving ourselves closer towards the world as it should be.

God, through the sound of the *shofar*, rouses our souls from their slumber caused by our sense of powerlessness – as the *shofar* is sounds we hear God saying - "I have gifted each and everyone one of you with the ability to ACT – WAKE UP- and get to work together bringing the world closer towards redemption." The shofar not only stirs us to personal action but also stirs us to communal action! This is exactly what my parents taught me

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that winter – that we have a sacred obligation to work towards bridging the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be. Could you imagine my father walking into the superintendent’s office by himself, a single teacher, demanding they deal with classroom size, teacher’s wages and health care? One teacher couldn’t do it alone – we needed each other.

The idea of community action and responsibility is expressed beautifully in our liturgy on both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. After all, we don’t say “on the sin that I have sinned” – rather we say “on the sin that we sinned.” The power of our repentance and the power of our prayers are amplified - resounding towards the heavens as we move not as one but as a many! On these the holiest of days in our tradition we can not go it alone – we need each other! Today as we celebrate the first day of the New Year 5769, the *shofar* and the realities of the world in which we live provoke us to recognize that all of us here today are among the ones in need, the ones of whom God spoke.

We all live in a world filled with uncertainty, from the environment, to the economy, to war and it seems that each and every one of us has a growing sense of powerlessness to affect real change. TEKIAH – the *shofar* sounds - agitating us towards action!

The key to unwrapping this gift of action, given to us by God - begins with building relationships. Our power to effect real change in our community lies in the deep and meaningful relationship we have with one another. This is the first step towards redemption; towards closing that gap between the world as it is and the world as it should

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be. Just about two years ago, as a community we turned towards ourselves in order to grow and change as a community as we successfully launched our Tekiah initiative. We sat down together and asked each other: “What are you proud of?” “What are your hopes and dreams?” “What keeps you up at night?” As we shared our stories with one another we built community and began to uncover our potential to ACT together on issues that matter to all of us! Last December we gathered together in this very sanctuary and called out in one loud voice TEKIAH – and in response we heard the blast of the *shofar* – it sounded not as a sign of the New Year but as a call – a call to action! As a result of the relationships we worked hard to build and in response to our sacred calling, we began to move. Last year over 50 families in the Shir Tikva community came together and pledged to make their homes greener, go on a low carbon diet, and make a real collective impact on the world as it is – and indeed they did.

Together we reduced our carbon emissions – together we closed that gap – we moved the world as it is one step closer towards the world as it should be. As part of our work with State Representative Tom Conroy we helped move him towards a vote supporting a budget amendment for increasing funds aimed at reducing teen violence, an issue that had not previously been on his legislative agenda. TEKIAH – the *shofar* sounded and together, not as individuals – but as one we heeded the call.

Yet, as a community we have only begun to scratch the surface of our potential to act, our and to effect real change. As a community we have successfully turned inwards in reflection, listening to one another's stories, and over the past year we have begun to act on some of the issues that are meaningful to us as a synagogue community. However, we can not stop there – our next step must to begin to move outside the walls of our own Temple Shir Tikva community. Just as we realized that we weren't alone in our pain and powerlessness that we feel so to we will be awakened to the same realization when we begin to build meaningful relationships with our neighbors. We do not have to suffer alone in these uncertain times.

Just as we worry about the safety and future our children so too do our Framingham neighbors in the Brazilian community, just as many of us worry about the future of our jobs so too to our friends and neighbors in Lincoln, Natick, Sudbury and all over the metrowest. We all live in the world as it is and the only way for us to overcome our sense of powerlessness and to affect real change - to bring the world as it is closer towards the world as it should be – is to work hand in hand together. The world as it is teaches us the work of redemption doesn't come when we act on behalf of someone else – it comes when we act as ONE together!

The world as it is – the world in which we live is to fragile to broken not to reach out, and not to work and act together! I know we can close the gap between the world as it and the world as it should be by joining hands together right here in Metrowest – from

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Framingham, to Naitck, to Wayland, to Westin, to Lincoln to Sudbury – Jews, Christian, and Muslims, together – acting not on behalf of the other but together! Imagine now a year where we the members of Temple Shir Tikva along with other synagogues, churches and mosques in Metrowest join together and act powerfully and effectively to bring about real systemic change - right here in our own communities. Imagine a year when the feeling of powerlessness fades as we build strong and meaningful relationships.

Imagine a year, when together, we are the ones making sure that the environment is a top priority for our local leaders, we are the ones making sure that our teens aren't faced with the stresses and pressures that lead them to self-destructive and abusive behaviors, that we are the ones who are helping to make sure that our elders age with dignity, and that we are truly part of the broader community that helps each other through these tough and uncertain times. Imagine with me if you will – the world as it should be –and this year may we, together, work towards that sacred vision.

Well, there I was, shivering, cold, tired, cranky, – but looking back on that winter's day there was no place I would rather have been – standing hot chocolate in hand, wrapped and bundled – proudly marching with my father and his co-workers. It was, for me now, a winter of action – the winter my parents taught us the power of collective action – taught us the holiness and effectiveness in working together with others to bridge the gap between the world as it and the world as it should be. My prayer is that the year 5769 will be the year Shir Tikva continues the holy work of building relationships within the walls of our own community.

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My prayer is that the year 5769 will be the year that we reach out to our brothers and sisters in the broader community in order to build meaningful relationships. My prayer is that the year 5769 is the year of action for all of us, a year in which we join hands with each other, our friends and our neighbors, across race, across religion, and across economic status and ACT together in order to bring our world one step closer towards redemption. I ask all of and God, this Rosh Hashana that in the year 5769 “we pray as if everything depends on the creator and act as if everything depends on us.”