

# Drash for Erev Rosh HaShanah 5779

## *Introduction*

צדק צדק תרדוף *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*:  
“Justice, justice you shall pursue.” (*Devarim* 16.20)

Shanah Tovah! How was your year? Mine was busy, in ways I can't say surprised me, but not in ways I might have chosen.

Like many of us, I experienced personal tragedy and was consoled by our community's response. Like many of us, I participated in holy days such as these, and regular Jewish life as well, and found some times more meaningful, and other times more challenging. And like many of us, the more normal moments of my or any human life were punctuated regularly and powerfully by the horrors our current Federal government is causing in our nation and in the world. As Jews we've been called upon regularly by our conscience as by our social justice organizations: צדק צדק תרדוף *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*: “Justice, justice you shall pursue.”.

The other day I was looking through emails and saw this apt subject line: “365 days of anxiety.”

Indeed. I'm blaming the onset of a cold last night on it, since I've never been sick on Rosh HaShanah in all the thirty years that I have been privileged to act as *shalikhat tzibbur*, messenger of communal prayer.

Feeling put upon. This seems a good time to muse for a moment upon the ancient Jewish wisdom from the Talmud which we just heard.

הוא היה אומר, לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה.

*lo alekha ham'lakha ligmor, v'lo ahah ben horin l'hibatel mimenu.*

It is not up to you to finish the work, yet neither are you exempt from it.

What I'd like to consider with you this evening is a thought about how to navigate between the two ideas contained in this statement as we continue to hear the clarion, shofar-like call that reverberates in our hearts: "justice, justice, you must pursue."

Like so much else in our lives, a balance is needed here, so that we are able - individually and collectively - to understand what we can do despite the sense of overwhelm, and, conversely, perversely, subversively, to discern our true impact on that part of the whole upon which we are able to act.

I also hope to surprise you with some of the possible interpretations of these words: צדק תרדוף *tzedek, tzedek, tirdof*, "justice, justice, you must pursue."

### **1. Justice: You are not exempt**

"365 days of anxiety." It's true; even on Shabbat, even during a really great yoga session, or even by taking refuge in whatever bad habit, a thinking person is unable to completely disengage for long from the chronic stress that has become the underlying rhythm of our days.

At this moment, if you were to take a geological core sample of the average person's consciousness, you would find bits like this:

- \* over 3700 children were separated from their parents by our government this year. 497 are still being held away from their parents, including 22 who are younger than five years old.
- \* a google search using the terms "political crisis 2018" brought up Italy, Maldives, Bangladesh, Venezuela, Thailand, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Brazil, Argentina, Turkey and Kenya. Not to mention the United States, in which our elected leaders now make common cause with autocrats, tyrants and psychopaths.
- \* oh, and then there's the news from Israel, where the government passed a discriminatory Nation State Law. Israelis are in the streets protesting. That, we have in common still, thank G\*d.

One of the problems with trying to take it all in, trying to respond to every need, trying to show up for every cause, is that it's impossible and you will simply exhaust yourself. Then you may be tempted to turn your back on the whole, because you yourself have not seen movement of the particular mountain in your view.

But there's the rub, the more essential problem, here. This giving up is actually the expression of a certain kind of egotism. None of us can address the whole of any problem, and to believe that we can is to perversely feed our *yetzer hara'*, the evil impulse in each of us that says "I, alone, can and should be able to do this." This nonsense both inflates and deflates the ego, as well as causing us to misjudge our dependence on each other.

“You didn’t build that,” as President Obama said, and was famously misunderstood. He was trying to make precisely this point: none of us does anything alone - none of us *can*. None of us, alone, can bring about a more just, a more safe, a more holy world. All of us depend upon the networks of relationships that are our true communities of meaning.

In the past year Shir Tikvah has jumped in to the deep waters and responded as a community, as well as individuals, to many of the needs and the causes that keep exploding into our every day lives. I am proud that we have done our level best not to turn away, yet also not to give in to overwhelm and despair.

- \* We’ve established a regular aspect of our weekly email communication in which we offer a form of Jewish Resistance, curated, you might say, to be meaningful, from the many opportunities out there.
- \* With your support I have been active in pursuing social justice as a Rabbi and leader in our local community. At times, I have been privileged to act on your behalf.
- \* We have shown up as a community to make our voices heard for justice in our community, and as a community have endorsed, supported and sponsored different attempts at *tikkun olam*, repairing the world. In what I believe is an unusual act for a shul, Shir Tikvah as a congregation annually does *tzedakah* on behalf of us all. Last year we gave to Women Wage Peace in Israel, and Don’t Shoot PDX here in Portland.

We’re not exempt from the work, so we do what we can.

I’ve been asked if I’ve been arrested - during the summer of action led by the Interfaith Movement for Immigrant Rights, many clergy have been. And I’ve answered no; after some thought, I realize that for various reasons

that is an act which is beyond what I can do, right now. I'm happy to explain my thinking more to anyone who's curious. Suffice to say I am not ruling out civil disobedience. לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמַּלְאָכָה לְגַמּוֹר *lo alekha*, it is not up to you to do it all. Me neither. So we do what we can, and keep the ideal of justice before our eyes and our hearts, because these are the days in which we live.

During these Days of Awe we are to consider our lives, and those acts that might seal us in the Book of Life for the coming year. Tomorrow we will share a song, with a melody from before the Holocaust, from the Hasidim of Muncacz, which concludes: “acts of justice have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny.”

צִדְקָה תִּרְדּוּף *tzedek tzedek tirdof*: “justice, justice, you shall pursue.” The verse continues “that you may live.” This declaration of Jewish tradition echoes all the way back to the Book of *Devarim*, in a text we studied just a few weeks ago.

Big words, sometimes carved in marble on a lintel and sometimes declared in formal tones that ring out over the land. Sometimes, the justice we pursue is the big fish, the fearsome mythical *levyatan* out there in the deep water.

## **2. Justice: out there and in here**

But sometimes, the justice we must pursue is much closer, right here in the quiet shallows. Even as a sea is made of innumerable drops of water,

justice, our tradition teaches, is made up of the myriad of local, personal just acts that we choose to undertake, or fail to notice, every day.

The Sages of the Talmud offer a range of definitions of local justice that can help us understand what we mean here.

Some of it is acting: it is justice to redistribute wealth, also known as giving *tzedakah* - note that the root of this word is the same as *tzedek*, “justice.” But it is considered a greater act of justice to create loans and jobs so that people can know the dignity of taking care of themselves. (BT *Shabbat* 63a) This is not simply the just act, but the justice of taking note of the individual upon whom we are acting. (JT *Pe’ah* 8.8)

So, yes, some of it is attitude: we are taught that it is not just the *tzedek* you do, but how you do it, which is important. That which is done in expectation that someone else will notice does not rank as high, ethically, as that which is done quietly, simply because it is the right thing to do. (*Pirke Avot* 5.16)

Here is one definition of local acts of justice offered by our tradition:

Rabbi Yohanan said, every day the Blessed Holy One sings the praises of three kinds of people:  
single people who live in a city and do not sin;  
poor people who return articles to their rightful owners;  
and wealthy people who give quietly. (BT *Pesakhim* 113a)

A local effort toward small just acts was undertaken several months ago in our Jewish community. A series of conversations was convened for Jewish

professionals, those who work in our shuls and organizations, to consider how we sustain local justice in workplace behavior.

The meetings were a response to a local Jewish news report, which you may have seen, containing an accusation by a Jewish professional against a member of the community who subjected her to sexual harassment.

We are obligated by our *halakhah*, Jewish law, to take great care regarding the feelings and morale of those around us. Under the general rule of “do not do to someone else that which you hate” we can list the following:

1. a seller may not lie or conceal the truth to a buyer, whether one is selling a product or an idea
2. one Jew may not remind a second Jew that the second Jew converted
3. one must pay a worker on the day the pay is due

These obligations extend, as you can see, beyond the material to care for the well-being of those with whom we share our lives, in our communities and in the public spaces we share.

Since many of us are concerned about the safety of our people in our shuls, the question of what behavior on our part causes others to feel unsafe is of paramount importance.

This, too, is justice, or the lack thereof. We don't typically consider such a grand word to apply to the small, local moments of our days, but taken together, the everyday moments either build or tear down the just society we strive to create.

Justice in our workplaces, and, for us in meaningful communities which are not necessarily workplaces, justice in the spaces where we gather. Here, right now, this evening.

- \* Justice is done in small ways among us when we praise, offer help, show interest, and acknowledge each other's reality.
- \* Justice is done when we intervene with each other whenever we witness demeaning, negative comments, insulting, intentionally ignoring, rude language, sarcasm, or sabotaging of reputation.

This is justice, if small acts lead to big ones, as we know they can. The repetition of the word *tzedek* in our Torah verse, *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, suggests just that. Just means to just ends; micro-justice leading to macro-Justice G\*d willing.

If we believe that every small thing we do justly can create an environment where larger things will also more likely be more just, then we're not only in line with the consultants who led the conversation on safe workplaces in the Jewish community, we're also seeing the truth of the Jewish teaching that says

הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אֵל תְּהִי בָּז לְכָל אָדָם, וְאֵל תְּהִי מִפְּלִיג לְכָל דָּבָר,  
שְׂאִין לְךָ אָדָם שְׂאִין לוֹ שְׂעָה וְאִין לְךָ דָּבָר שְׂאִין לוֹ מְקוֹם:

Despise no one, and consider nothing useless. There is nothing that does not have its place, and no person who does not have their moment. (*Pirke Avot* 4.3)

This too is justice, and *lo at bat horin* *l'hibatel mimenu*, we are not exempt. This year Shir Tikvah is devoted to seeing what we can together do to establish this kind of justice, too. Stay tuned, because within our teaching moments we want to together consider

how we might create a community definition of what we mean, just as other aspects of our thoughtful intentional community are expressed in our vision statement (back there on the wall, on our website, and, remember? in the old paper membership directory).

### **3. pursue it**

There's a Hasidic teaching: if we consider that the person sitting next to us at any moment might be Elijah, checking on our behavior to see if we merit the coming of *Mashiakh*, we would watch our every word and deed. And if we did so, we wouldn't need the *mashiakh*.

This leads us to the final aspect of our Torah verse: *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, "justice, justice you shall pursue." Both in addressing the social currents of our day, and in taking care to act justly with the person next to you, it is not enough to wait for opportunities to come to us. We have to go looking for them, notice them, and chase them down - in short, pursue them.

Story: One of our founders, Leigh Dolin, asked me for a good Hebrew name for Shir Tikvah's social justice committee. We settled on *rodfeiy tzedek*, "pursuers of justice," a rather superhero sounding name which always makes me think of Leigh in tights and a cape. He led Shir Tikvah in its early days to pursue justice by committing to serve our neighbors through the food bank, local shelters, homeless youth and LGBTQ rights, to name a few.

Here, thought, it's easy to mistake *tzedek* for the act of volunteering to help those less fortunate than oneself. But *tzedek* is more: *tzedek* is translated as justice, righteousness, and honesty.

A Rabbi from the great Jewish community of prewar Poland offered this teaching about the obligation to chase after *tzedek*:

“There is no finality or end to the discerning of justice and truth... Therefore we must always continue to deepen our search for true truth, for it is not truth until it brings us together as one....

Thus the word *emet* contains the first, middle and last letters of the Torah.

It was said in the name of the Yid of Pryshykha, that we must pursue justice justly, not by subterfuge. Words from the mouth of the wise are grace.” (*Sefat Emet* 5.68, my translation)

The attitude of actively pursuing truth and honesty as a form of justice leads to interesting Jewish legal, cultural and linguistic norms:

- \* Judgment in a court of law is reached by a *beit din*, a court, of three, never on the word of one alone. Or it is decided on the word of two witnesses - but never one alone, because truth is never known completely, or even sufficiently, by one alone.
- \* the *mezuzah* goes from a protecting amulet in your doorway to a reminder not to be one kind of person at home and another in the world: we are taught to let your “out there” be the same as your “in here.”
- \* interestingly, the word *tzedakah* itself in Jewish usage can mean *justice, fairness, righteousness; true judgement* (all these ahead of the usual meaning we think of, which is *charity*); and, in the Haftarah for the 7th Shabbat of consolation which we just heard yesterday morning in shul, *tzedakah* can also mean “victory.”

*Conclusion*

Like so much else during these Days of Awe, the pursuit of justice invites us to consider the ways in which our ego, our sense of self, needs to be healthy before we can thrive in our world.

1. Doing justice in the world means being honest with ourselves, before G\*d, about how much we can take on. Facing the overwhelming level of the brutality human beings in power perpetrate on other human beings in our society, let's be honest: we can't heal it. Yet to turn away and say I've done enough, or I'm burned out, is just not acceptable: *it is not up to you to finish the work; yet neither are you exempt from doing your part.*

2. *tzedek* requires honesty inside and out: so what about us, here, this community which is us? One thing will take us down as surely as it will end civil society in the United States, and that is injustice tolerated among us. What local act of injustice have you witnessed that you could have intervened to stop? What local act of justice are you called upon to do?

How will you know when what you're pursuing is actually justice and not just feeding your own ego? *marbeh tzedakah, marbeh shalom* declares our tradition: "the more justice, the more peace" - the more wholeness, the more life. (*Pirke Avot 2.7*)

3. We cannot fix it all out there. We probably can't fix it all in here. But we have a culture of kindness here at Shir Tikvah, in very many small local ways. I have seen gentle smiles offered to those who are suffering, and hugs where appropriate, and help moving, and anonymously offered loans, and a listening ear, and an invitation to share a Shabbat dinner or lunch.

Now, consider believing in your ability to pursue justice by expanding the kind pockets of this culture and others where you act in the world. Pursue justice by being less suspicious, less willing to believe an angry person, less ready to listen to *lashon hara'*, less ready to let cynicism conquer you.

Pursue justice, yes, by being less willing to believe the worst of each other, both here and in the larger society. If we can do that, we will fulfill the greatest and most difficult Jewish teaching on the power of justice:

*Tzedakah tatzil mimavet* - “*tzedakah* saves from death.”

No, *tzedek* won't keep you alive longer - but your determination to keep on pursuing *tzedek*, in appropriate measure, in large ways and small, out there and in here, makes you memorable beyond the years you spend with us here, and in that way you will be saved from the death of being forgotten. It will seal you in the Book of Life for much longer than your lifespan, because someone else will remember your act when they are not sure what to do.

Pursuing *tzedek* saves us from the thousand small deaths we inflict on ourselves and others every time we turn away from the needs and joys of life, mine and yours and theirs and hers and his, and allow our communal life to be less vibrant, less supportive, less important to us.

Pursuing *tzedek* means that at the end of every day you'll know you did your best. This is the foundational act of justice that will build us up or undo us in the end, and it's what we should assume of each other, every one of us, in every situation, at the end of every day.

כן יהי רצון