

Rosh Hashanah Day 1, 5781

In the past, I've made two comments about my approach to writing sermons. One is that you don't need me to tell you what's wrong with the world. The other is that it's the rabbi's job to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. The second still holds true, but I'm going to modify the first... you may not need me to *tell* you what's wrong in the world, but you do need to hear me talk about it.

Following the death of Chadwick Boseman from cancer—at much too young an age—a colleague of mine received a frantic, late-night email from a bi-racial family in her congregation. Their 10 year-old son accused God of being racist, and they had no idea how to respond. He was angry at God, and understandably so. He has every right to be angry.

I imagine many of us have been feeling angry this year, angry at God, at the universe, at China, the White House, The House of Representatives, the CDC, the FDA, Major League Baseball, you name it, there's plenty to go around. And we're angry at people—friends and loved ones who died of COVID; white police officers who shot black people; as well as our family members and friends in the LGBTQ community, those in financial need and others who may not have access to the same healthcare services as others. We're angry at the news and social media that only give us one side of the story in soundbytes. And let's not forget that 2020 started off with a good deal of violent antisemitic acts including the murders in Jersey City and the Chabad in Rockland County, violence against Jews in Brooklyn and antisemitic graffiti here in Nassau County.

I look at my 30 and 28 year-old children and wonder, yet again, what kind of world we're leaving them. Most of us are at an age when we wondered that 50 and 60 years ago—and we swore we weren't going to bring children into the world because we were destroying the planet. The fact that millennials and Gen X, Y and Z-ers are getting married and having children gives me hope, however, that not all is lost.

Remember the movie, *Network*, from 1976? Peter Finch, who played the veteran deranged, fed up newscaster threatened to shoot himself on the air yelling, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" I don't remember what he was "mad as hell" about, and I didn't watch the movie again to find out. I didn't like it the first time! I couldn't find a source or attribution for it, but someone said, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention."

There's a lot to be outraged about in the world today, but as someone else said, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

None of what we're dealing with now is truly new; bias, discrimination and violence based on ethnicity and race is as old as dirt. Catastrophic illness affecting entire communities and countries took the place of people getting eaten by wild animals or starving in prehistoric times.

What's different now is technology. It has its positives and its negatives. On the plus side, it allows us to connect with people around the world in an instant. On the negative side, it allows us to connect with people around the world in an instant. We know about events as they're unfolding, where a mere 50 years ago, you had to wait for the evening news or the morning paper to know what had happened.

Hear a big boom? Lose power? See a circling helicopter? Go onto the "I Love Malverne Village" Facebook page and 12 people will have already asked, "anyone know what's happening...?"

I can't stop terrible things from happening in the world, and praying to God to step in and do so is what we call a *tefillat shav*, a "wasted prayer." To paraphrase the Dalai Lama, people created these problems, people have to fix them. Praying to God won't help." Of course, the Dalai Lama is a non-theist, but that's besides the point. We need to pray for the right things.

God is not Superman who can stop a bullet from hitting its intended target. On the other hand, a friend told me a story about her grandfather during the Holocaust. He and the others in his village had been lined up to be shot. The Nazi officers shot three rounds from their machine guns, and somehow, they missed him every time and he was able to escape. We all have, or have heard, amazing stories of Divine intervention; however, we aren't allowed to rely on miracles, or to ask God to perform one.

So what can I pray for? I can pray that God grants me the wisdom and understanding to see people for who they are, and not make judgments based on the color of their skin, their religion, or even the number of tattoos they have. When, and I hope it's not "if," a person of color walks into services—once we can meet in person—I pray that I—and we—won't automatically react out of fear or surprise.

I can pray that God helps me develop my sense of compassion for all, to help me find the strength to stand up for what's right. I've never been an activist type of person. I hate crowds, so you won't find me at huge rallies. However, I did participate in marches back in June in West Hempstead and Malverne to support our black community, and I know I can do more.

I can pray that God grants compassion and patience to police officers who have a "shoot first, ask questions later" mentality, and to support the majority of police officers who do their jobs with compassion and respect. I can ask God to support men and women of color who currently live in fear, the people in the gay and trans communities who are targeted, elders who are no longer able to make their own life choices, and others who are marginalized.

I can pray that God will grant wisdom to the medical professionals and researchers who are actively working to contain the coronavirus pandemic and hopefully come up with an effective vaccine. In the meantime, however, I can wear my mask, wash my hands, avoid gatherings and limit my excursions to help keep myself and others safe. I pray that God's healing power will support those who are in need.

I can, and I do, pray that God will guide me to be a positive force in the world. I hope you will too.

This is the meaning of *teshuva*.