

PLANTING TREES

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The Talmud tells us several stories about a certain Jewish mystic that lived in the land of Israel around 2000 years ago. His name was Honi haGilgal - or Honi the Circle Maker.

One day as Honi was out walking on the outskirts of his town he came upon an old man who was planting a sapling.

Honi, who was not known for having the best social skills, yelled out to the elderly gentleman “Hey, old man! What sort of tree are you planting?”

“A carob tree,” the old man replied.

Honi shook his head and said: “What are you doing planting a carob tree? Don’t you know it takes a carob tree 70 years to mature? Do you really think that you’ll live to see its fruit?”

The old man simply and patiently replied, “I am not planting this tree for myself. Just as I came into this world and found trees that my ancestors had planted for me, so I plant trees for my children, and my grandchildren to enjoy.”

In many ways Honi and the old man in this story represent two very different cultures, two very different views towards life.

Honi believed that we should only expend energy on what we can *personally* benefit from, that there should be tangible and immediate fruits to reward our labor.

However, the old man understood that there was something more important than living in the moment, or doing something only for our own enjoyment. He looked at the world and saw that he had benefited from the generations that had come before him, and he believed that the best way to repay his sense of gratitude was by doing something similar for those who would come after him.

I have known many Honi's in my life, but I have been lucky to know many more people who remind me of the man who planted a tree in this story.

Whenever I walk through old Sacramento or look up at our old ark doors, talk to someone who lived through WWII, listen to someone who participated in the creation of the State of Israel, or was involved in the Civil Rights movement, or worked to bring about women's equality in the work place and in the law, I find myself awed by all that they have done, all the seeds that *they* have planted, so that *I* could inherit a world that was better than the one that *they* had been born into.

And then I read the paper, and I am reminded of the oil spill in the Gulf, a rising deficit, devastating unemployment numbers, a crumbling public school system, ongoing wars, and I wonder, what seeds are we planting? What sort of world will my children and my grandchildren inherit?

I look at all of the trouble that we have created because we live for the moment, and too rarely do we plan for the long haul.

Judaism teaches us that it is important to remember that all that we do, or don't do, has consequences, not only for us, but for future generations as well. We are each a link in a chain that stretches back to the creation of the world, and each of us has an obligation not to let that chain end with us. The story of Honi and the Carob tree is both a warning and a reminder that the seeds that we plant today will be harvested by future generations.

Each of us in our own lives have benefited from those who have planted trees for us, we have eaten the fruit of their labor and found refuge in the shade of those trees.

But when I look at my children, I can not help but wonder what seeds are we planting for them to sow?

When I was in my 20's a wise teacher once asked my friends and I "what do you do?" Several people spoke up and called out the names of their professions. And the teacher shook his head and said again "what do you do *that matters*? Have you taught a child? Have you helped someone who needed you? Do you engage in *tikkun olam*? What do you do that will *matter* when you are no longer here?

In other words, he was asking us, what trees are we planting?

At Rosh HaShanah we are given the gift of time and reflection. We slow down long enough to examine our lives and ask ourselves if we are doing the things that truly matter. And if we are not, we are reminded that now is the time to start.

We are not expected to do everything, but we are expected to do *something*.

Rabbi Tarfon was a great sage who lived during the destruction of the Beit HaMikdash, the Holy Temple, in Jerusalem. He was so revered that he was called “the father of all Israel.” When asked about a person’s life in this world he said: “The day is short, there is much work, and the workers are lazy, but the reward is great and the Owner is pressing.”

By this he meant that our life goes by quickly, and there is so much to be done, but we tend to be lazy in engaging in study and tikkun olam, but the reward for doing these things are immeasurable, and the Owner, is the one who created us all, and created us so that each generation will continue the work of Creation, leaving the world better than how they found it.

But so that we won’t get overwhelmed by what is being asked of us, Rabbi Tarfon tries to comfort and inspire us with these reassuring words: *Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorim l'hibatil mimena*. It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it all-together. (Pirke Avot 2:16)

We have two ways that we can look at all of the problems in our world, the environment, homelessness, the mounting deficit, wars, and poverty, and so much more, the problems that seem far away, as well as the ones that are on our doorstep. We can look at these problems and allow ourselves to be overwhelmed and discouraged, and say why bother, what can we do to even make a dent?

Or, we can take the perspective of Rabbi Tarfon, and remember that when we talk about tikkun olam, we are only asked that each of us do what we *can* do, no more no less.

There are so many ways to make a difference. You can begin to heal the world by committing to our Sustainable Living pledge and do something as simple as bring your own grocery bags each time you go to the store, or you can walk more and drive less. You can help a person who is homeless by volunteering once a month at Loaves and Fishes or fill a grocery bag full of food and bring it back here with you on Kol Nidre, or whenever you come to temple.

You can help a child by making a donation to a scholarship fund, or become a Big Brother or Big Sister, or tutor a student at a local elementary school.

Don't wait until you retire to volunteer your time, and don't wait until you win the lottery before you donate money. You will find that if you start with what you can give, the rewards you receive will far exceed what you give.

The specific amount of time and the specific task matters less than the fact that you *do* something. Look into your heart and ask yourself, what matters to you? Reflect on your own life, and the trees that were planted for you. What did your parents and your grandparents instill in you as values to live by? Who were your teachers? What was done for you that you would now like to do for others?

While Rosh Hashanah is a time for personal reflection, we do it in the context of being part of something greater than ourselves. Redemption in Judaism comes not from looking out only for ourselves, but by being engaged in tikkun olam and the lives of others.

I am so grateful to be a part of this congregation, to be surrounded by people for whom service to both the Jewish and the larger community is simply a part of who they are. People who both in their personal and professional lives are committed to creating a better world.

Last year I asked our congregants to commit to at least 18 hours of service to our congregation between last Rosh Hashanah and this one. Hundreds of you responded by doing at least 18 hours, and dozens more of you volunteered considerably more.

You volunteered for Family Promise, and for our various social action committees. You volunteered for our youth and adult education programs, our choir and as Shammuses, you read Torah on Shabbat and on the holidays.

You volunteered on our board and our many committees, for special projects and events. You delivered shiva baskets and chicken soup, and you volunteered with our Brotherhood and as part of the Women of B'nai Israel, and you reached out to newcomers and young adults helping them find their own place here.

Each of you have helped make B'nai Israel what it is - a place where we can all come when we are in need, looking for comfort, or inspiration, a place where we

can go to make a difference because we want to be engaged in tikkun olam, a place where we can study and grow, or simply a place to be when we are seeking God, in the presence of our community.

If you look around the room you will notice that there are people who are wearing blue and silver Chai pins either on their name-tags or their lapels. These are the many of the people who are really the backbone of our congregation.

Eighteen hours by itself might not seem like a lot of time, but when we add up all of the volunteer hours that our congregants put in each year, it is as though we more than doubled our full time staff at the temple.

The rabbis teach us that at the High Holidays, the fate of the whole world hangs in the balance. That while each of us are judged individually for what we do, the world is judged based on whether or not collectively, we tip the scales towards righteousness or iniquity.

In the Talmud we are taught that “One may do more, another may do less, but both are acceptable, as long as the heart is directed to heaven (Berakhot 17a).” We are not all expected to do the same amount of work to repair the world we live in. We can’t all live a life where we leave a carbon neutral footprint on the planet. We don’t all have the time to volunteer every week, or to give of ourselves to every cause that we believe in. But we can all do something. And when we look at our collective efforts, not only is the world judged more favorably, the world begins to become a better place to live.

We can all use this gift of time that the High Holidays offers us to examine our lives and our actions and ask ourselves, what trees are we planting for the future? What deeds are we doing that tip the scales of justice towards good and towards righteousness? What are the things that I can do in my life that can make a difference now and when I am gone?

And after we ask and answer those questions, start with one thing, and do it, and before you know it, you will ask yourself why you didn’t start sooner.

As Rabbi Tarfon taught: *Lo alecha hamlichia ligmor* - It is not up to you to finish the task... *v'lo ata ben chorim l'hibatil mimena*...but neither are you free to desist from it altogether.

Each of us alone can make a small difference, but when each of us works towards the same goal with others, we can change the destiny of the world.

Whether it is creating community on a small scale like our synagogue, or a big scale like helping the environment, it is all possible, but only if we try, and only if we start today.

If we are like the old man that Honi the Circle Maker encountered on the side of the road, and we want our children and grandchildren to have trees to enjoy, then we must be the ones who plant them, and we can not wait another moment before we do so.

May this be a year where we plant more for future generations than we reap from the ones who have gone before us. *Ken yehi ratzon* - may this be God's will.