

Ten years ago, when I was notified that I would be your next rabbi, I was ecstatic. This was where I wanted to be, at Temple Beth Avodah. Of course, I called my family first, and then I called my friends. Included in the phone tree was my Yemenite taxi driver haver, Chezi, who adopted me as a surrogate son when I went to Israel in 1975 and has remained a good friend. Chezi, I said, mah nishma? How are you? His classic Israeli answer? Mah kara? What happened? You see, Israeli logic goes, Hayim is calling from America. He's not planning on coming now. So if he's calling, he's sick or someone died.

Hakol beseder, I answered. Everything's ok. But listen, I am moving to Newton, MA to start at a new position. Yeah, I'm going to be the rabbi at Kehilat Bet Avodah? "Bet Avodah"?, Chezi queried. What kind of a place is this? In Israel, it's the work house where you go after prison.

I assured him that Beth Avodah was not a half-way house, nor was it the work house. His confusion was totally understandable. The Hebrew word for work is *Avodah*. In Israel, you tell your family I'll be home from avodah for dinner. You ask your friends what they're doing after avodah.

But, in fact, the word avodah is remarkably complex. In some Biblical contexts, avodah means prayer. In other contexts, Avodah more closely translates as worship or liturgy.

Avodah also refers to a portion of the afternoon Yom Kippur service that, actually, we do not include in our own worship experience. The Avodah service describes the rituals enacted on Yom Kippur in the Jerusalem Temple in antiquity, when the [high Priest](#) would enter the Holy of Holies to utter the name of God at the height of the [atonement](#) rituals. In fact, all of the rituals that comprise the sacrificial system as we read about them in Torah are called Avodah.

We are the only Beth Avodah in the world. There's a bunch of Temple Avodahs, but just one of us. So, what does our name mean? Are we the house of liturgy? The house of worship? The house of prayer?

There a deeper meaning, a better translation for avodah, for we who include ourselves in the Beth Avodah community. The most compelling meaning of avodah for our purposes is service. We are meant to be of service, to be partners with God in the ongoing creation of the world.

Our Jewish tradition, regardless of the era or the sect, whether Ashkenazi or Sephardic, in Israel or the Diaspora, holds this to be true and self-evident. Life has meaning. Existence is not absurd. Our liturgy reminds us that we are finite and like blades of grass that wither. But our tradition also reminds us that we have the power to change the world every day, in small but meaningful ways, for the good or for evil. The choice is ours. Everything we do counts. Every action leads to another action. It's Newtonian ethics.

As Elliott Dorff says in his work on Tikkun Olam, “We may certainly take time to enjoy ourselves,... and we not only may, but we must spend time with our families and at our place of employment. But beyond all of these activities, and throughout our lives, we must dedicate at least part of our time, energy, and resources to engaging in service to others. Jews understand this almost instinctively. Surveys show that even for Jews who feel distant from Jewish prayer and practice there is a feeling in their bones that they have a duty as Jews to make this a better world, that this is, in fact, the essence of being Jewish.”

As Dorff makes very clear, doing service, avodah, through tikkun olam, through fixing the broken world, must not be seen as an optional activity. It is part and parcel of who we are and what must be done.

Which reminds me of a story. A young girl grew up in a small, isolated kingdom. One of the most striking things about her homeland was how kind people were. Folks went out of their way to be thoughtful. The motto of the land was, “Can I help you?” They didn’t park illegally in handicap zones. They almost never littered. If someone needed a hand, people rushed to be of service. It wasn’t a perfect place, but it was pretty terrific; clean and beautiful and most of all, welcoming.

The girl’s family left their homeland for all the reasons people go away. But she always thought about her homeland, and swore that one day, she would return. Years and years past and the girl became a successful, rich woman who traveled all over the world. But the time came when she felt like she had lost her soul and that she could regain her balance only if she returned to her homeland.

When she journeyed back to her birthplace, she could scarcely believe it. The land, once beautiful and clean, was now choked with weeds. Many of the trees had been cut down. Some of the houses were ramshackle huts and the people looked angry and burdened and sour. It didn't take her long to discover that the king had died, and that the prince had assumed the throne. He had different ideas about what how land could be exploited, and how the friendliness and trusting nature of his subjects could be manipulated.

As the woman walked through the streets of the capital, she couldn't get over how no one made eye contact. People were thoughtless and rude. She watched a postman drop his letter bag, scattering mail everywhere. Not one person offered to help. She heard them mutter, "It's not my problem." On the corner a child begged for bread. Passersby scowled and said, "Sorry kid, it's not my problem." In fact, "It's not my problem", was the kingdom's new mantra. Long gone were the words of her youth: "Can I help?" was simply not heard.

She was horrified. How had this happened? How could she help? And then it came to her. A plan. Special invitations arrived at the homes of the Kingdom's most affluent subjects. In fact, the King received a special

invitation in a beautiful velvet lined mahogany box. The guests were invited to join the unknown host on a yacht that would be in the harbor awaiting them. They were to feast on the greatest foods and drink the best wines.

Everyone who received the invitation was intrigued. Who was the host and what was the occasion? It sounded like fun so everyone showed up in the harbor. Sure enough, there was this beautiful yacht, fully appointed. The guests got on and the music started to play as waiters passed out canapés and champagne. The ship left the dock on schedule and was soon far from the shore.

As the buffet was being served and the people were living it up, a masked woman in beautiful evening attire quietly walked to the stern carrying a very heavy case. People wondered what she was up to but, hey, it's not my boat, not my problem. The woman opened the case and began assembling what looked like an industrial drill with a very long shaft. As she worked, people ate and drank, oblivious to the woman's activity. No one said to her, "Can I help?"

In about 10 minutes the contraption appeared assembled. She placed it on the deck, and twisted the handle. The drill began to rotate at a very high speed. The woman pulled a lever, and the drill bit began to bite – right through the deck. People watched in alarm as the drill quickly made its way through the hull. The woman reached in the case and brought out an all weather jacket and buttoned it up – just as a geyser of water shot out from the freshly drilled hole.

The guests shrieked as their clothes got soaked and as wine glasses crashed and cutlery fell. The king yelled, “What is the meaning of this madness?!” he demanded. It’s not my problem the woman said, reaching into the same case for the life vest – the only life vest. And she sat down.

The king looked around. Why was no one taking care of this? Every dignitary, now soaked from head to foot, up to their ankles on a yacht with no life boats or life vests stood there, wondering the same thing. Until one of the passengers, a waiter, picked up a bucket and started frantically bailing water. Another person got up. And another. And another. Can I help each one cried. Soon, everyone was pitching in, bailing, going below deck to try to patch the hole.

When the yacht limped back to the harbor, the crew on the dock stared incredulously. Captains of industry were slapping deckhands on the back. The rich and famous were hugging the valorous waiters and cooks. And the woman in the mask? She was gone, disappeared. But she left behind a legacy, a profound teaching that it's our problem. That everything is our problem.

And this is the message this Yom Kippur day. It's our problem. The world is torn and suffering. It's our problem. We are stuck in a terrible war in Iraq. It's our problem. The ecosystem of this planet is endangered. It's our problem. New Orleans, 2 years after Katrina is still struggling. It's our problem. "It's not my problem", is not Jewish philosophy. It does not compute. Pirkei Avot states in chapter 2, verse 21, "lo alecha hamlacha ligmor v'lo atah ben chorine leebatel meemenah - You are not obliged to finish the task, neither are you free to neglect it". This is our truth. This is our obligation. This is our avodah.

Judaism does not have the equivalent of the Rapture, when all the good guys go to heaven and all the bad guys get left with the mess down below. This is the world that God has given us to manage. As Robert DeNiro says in the Deer Hunter, “This is this.” This is how we serve.

There are those who scoff at our community, people who demean us as self involved, as selfish and affluent and utterly disconnected from the real world. Such talk angers and offends me, because they don’t have a clue what we do here and what we intend to do in the future.

If you take a look at the photos from Mitzvah Day last year, you will see hundreds of people as busy as can be, buzzing around the social hall, the foyer, the parking lot, the classrooms – everywhere in this big building – serving. I came to understand our community in a new way. I saw, I witnessed the spirit of a community whose heart leads them to serve.

Following that impulse, living a life that includes avodah, service, gives a sense of centeredness and meaning. And that is why after this service I implore you to look outside in the foyer for the info about Mitzvah Day 2007. We need you to lend a hand. It’s our problem....

We understand at heart, that service is closer to generosity than it is to duty. It connects us to one another and to life itself. When we experience our connectedness, serving others becomes the natural and joyful thing to do. Over the long run, fixing and helping are draining, but service is renewing. When you serve, your work, your avodah, will sustain you, renew you, and bless you, often, and over many years. [Rachel Naomi Remen]

And even if the idea of service feels like an underutilized muscle, don't forget that this is your year to serve, to reach out and extend yourself in a new way. Dare to do this, embrace your avodah, your service. This is it. It's got to be this way. The question to ask over and over is, "How can I help?" It's inevitable. As the great Robert Zimmerman once sang,

You may be an ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

You might be a rock 'n' roll addict prancing on the stage,
You might have drugs at your command, women in a cage,
You may be a business man or some high degree thief,
They may call you Doctor or they may call you Chief

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed

You're gonna have to serve somebody,

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord

But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

And when someone asks you, what does Beth Avodah mean, anyway, say,
not with pomposity or puffery, but with purpose, it means a place of service.