

The liturgy from which we pray during the High Holy Days is not a slap dash assortment of prayers and meditations put together in a haphazard, arbitrary fashion. The great liturgists had specific thoughts about where every prayer needed to go and why. There were and are some serious disagreements amongst rabbis and scholars from different parts of the Jewish world about prayer placement. This is why Sephardic prayerbooks differ to a certain degree from Ashkenazic prayerbooks, not to mention Reform vs Conservative vs Orthodox prayerbooks.

But here's one thing about which they agree. The Confessional prayers we chant on Yom Kippur are written in the first person plural. The first major confessional prayer, Ashamnu bagadnu, gazalnu, debarnu doffi literally recounts sins from aleph to tof. The English translation says we have sinned, we have betrayed, we have stolen, we have spoken libel, and so on. Later on we chant al het she'hatanu: for the sin that we have sinned, not I have sinned.

As you might imagine, the rabbis spend a great deal of time discussing this first person plural usage. They say: If I have committed only some of these sins, why do I have to ask forgiveness for all of the sins listed here? Shouldn't it be more of a personal check list that each one of us makes privately?

Of course our reflections on this Yom Kippur are deeply personal and close to our hearts. Each one of us uses this day as a means of adjusting our moral compasses, setting a corrected trajectory for our ethical behavior as we move forward into 5770. Each one of us has his and her own unique path to follow. The first person plural nature of our prayers today does not take that away.

The first person plural is a pointed reminder of how we think about ourselves as Jews. We are a collective. We are a people. We are a community. We are a family. We share in each other's naches, joyfulness, and each others tzuris (sorrows).

At least 178 Jews and persons of half- or three-quarters-Jewish ancestry have been awarded the Nobel Prize, accounting for 23% of all individual recipients worldwide between 1901 and 2008, and constituting 37% of all US recipients<sup>2</sup> during the same period. Jews currently make up approximately 0.25% of the world's population and 2% of the US population. Talk about shepping naches, about deriving pleasure from the accomplishments of fellow Jews!!

On the other hand, when Bernard Madoff was arrested, not to mention the 5 rabbis arrested for laundering millions of dollars for the Mob, Jews everywhere in the world were shaken and ashamed. Our response was partially due in no small part to classic Jewish anxiety about what happens when a Jewish name is attached to any unlawful activity, and money-related crimes doubly so, because we have a well developed paranoia about antisemitism.

But there's something more: we responded the way we did because, Madoff and the rabbis are members of our family. I don't know Madoff, never met the disgraced rabbonim, and I say a plague on them all. By shaming themselves, they shamed all of us. We don't get to take the Nobel prize winners and then leave the nogoodniks behind. They belong to us, too.

We, the first person plural, we the Jewish people, the good, the bad and the ugly, are a part of something big and dynamic, compelled by a transcendent force that draws us forward through time and tragedy. We are a tribe, a people, a history, a force in the world. We share a profound and complicated history that threads through every continent, every major Western cultural movement. Flowing deeply through our Jewishness is a unique sense of our mission and our destiny as Jews.

What is our mission? How do we define it right now? What is our purpose, our function in this ongoing story of struggle, survival, and triumph? For us, the members of Beth Avodah, the answer is loud and clear: our Jewish role right now is to transform the world.

I know, such a big, audacious plan! The pain and suffering in the world is so big and overwhelming. What chutzpah to think we can do anything about it. And yet...

Once a woman was walking along a beautiful beach. There had been a storm the night before and, as a result, there were thousands of starfish washed up onto the shore by the surf. She noticed a few hundred yards in front of her was a child, maybe 8 or 9 years old, throwing starfish back into the sea. When she reached the child she stopped and said, "There are so many starfish washed ashore. I'm afraid you're not really going to make much of a difference here." With that the child picked up a starfish and tossed it into the ocean, turned to the woman and said, "It sure made a difference to that one."

In the Mishnaic collection of ethical aphorisms, Pirke Avot, it is written, Lo Alecha Hamlacha Ligmor, V'lo Atah Ben Chorin L'hibateil Mimeina, It is Not

Your Duty to Complete the Work, Neither are you free to Desist From It. In other words, of course there are too many starfish to throw back. You'll never succeed at throwing them all back. But in the meantime, keep throwing starfish. Don't be naive, but don't scoff at idealism, at the raw effort to transform the world.

This year we are hard at work with ongoing projects like Family Table, a food pantry for needy Jewish families in the greater Boston area. Like the quiet collecting of mens and women's suits that are given to folks who want to go to job interviews but lack proper clothing. Like supporting the work of the Jewish national Fund. Our Social Action co-chairs, Pat D'Amore and Bunny Aronson, taking over this year from Harriet Sive and Debbie Cutler, are seasoned starfish throwers. They have a number of plans for the year and you will be reading about their ideas.

I want to tell you about three new initiatives we're getting involved with, and one big annual commitment. I invite you to explore how they fit into your life.

In 1998, Rose Mapendo, along with her husband and seven children were arrested by Congolese soldiers, declared enemies of the state. They were put into a filthy, horrid prison camp along with friends and relatives from their village. Soldiers separated most of the men. Almost all the men including Rose's husband were then executed. In prison Rose watched other close relatives and friends die of malnutrition and disease.

As she languished in the foul prison camp, she soon realized that she was pregnant. She gave birth to twins prematurely. Her milk didn't nourish them. To keep them alive Rose soaked rags in tea and coaxed her babies to suckle on them.

Eight months after the twins' birth, sympathetic Congolese delivered Rose and her nine children to an International Committee for the Red Cross protection center in Kinshasa, the capital of the Congo. The US government had recognized the situation and funded emergency evacuations from this protection center to nearby African countries, from where the refugees would resettle to the US. Rose and her nine children arrived in the Kinshasa protection center a week before the final evacuation. They had spent 16 months in prison. News of the last rescue flight sparked their hope, but there was a problem: they were not on the evacuation list.

Due to complications with Congo's government, the rescue team had explicit instructions not to add any other people to the final flight out. Yet, it was clear to

the team that the twins would die if left in the protection center. The team agonized over the risks of adding more names. In the end they included Rose and her family on the evacuation, despite the threat to the entire mission.

In February 2000 Rose and her children were flown to a refugee camp in northern Cameroon. In August 2000 the family resettled to Phoenix, Arizona. The twins are healthy young boys now. Rose's children are all in school, and she watched her oldest son, John, graduate from high school in the spring of 2005. For the youngest, the traumas of prison have already faded into the distant past. In the face of violence, loss and extreme hardship, Rose found reserves of strength and courage to support and to keep alive her children.

Rose's story is emblematic of the people Mapendo International strives to help: those who aren't on any list, people who are overlooked by the existing aid world. The organization's founder was on the rescue team that evacuated Rose and her family to Cameroon. He chose to call the organization Mapendo, Swahili for "great love." Rose's story, and the needs of other people in dire and perilous situations, inspired and motivated Mapendo International's creation.

Risa Aronson has spearheaded Mapendo's mission at Beth Avodah. She has been working with our Social Action committee and with a new friend of the temple, Kitty Dukakis. I am honored to announce that on Friday night, November 20, we will be hosting Rose Mapendo at services. That Sunday, the 22, after Sunday School, Beth Avodah will be hosting a rally for Mapendo open to the public, with African music and more information about what we can do to help. There are so many refugees in appalling circumstances. How could we make the slightest difference to transform the sad story of heinous brutality against the powerless? Ask Rose's children. How can we as Jews look away and claim disinterest in this organization? Our experience with prison camps and violent subjugation compels us to acknowledge our mission.

This is our work -- not someone else's work.

Number two. I have seen the shape of things to come for our tzedakah work. The wave of our future is not surprisingly, related to technology. You'll hear more about number 2a later in the year. But I'll give you a hint -- it's all about social networking, B'nai Mitzvah kids, and tzedakah: go to [www.jchoice.org](http://www.jchoice.org). Don't go to jchoice.com unless you speak Japanese.

Back to number 2: Imagine a project that is very green, very progressive, very hi-tech, that raises Africans out of poverty, ignorance and sickness, and supports the

state of Israel. I'm describing the new organization called Jewish Heart for Africa. Donations made to JHA are invested directly into Israel's economy through the purchase of Israeli technologies. Israel is a leader in the alternative energy and agricultural industries, and has perfected the art of agriculture in an arid climate. Israeli solar and agricultural technologies are therefore the most logical solutions for African villages that face similar climate conditions. JHA works with Israeli companies to stimulate growth within the Israeli economy, and to foster a mutually beneficial partnership between the Diaspora communities, Israel and the African continent.

Through the purchase of Israeli technologies, JHA provides Israel with a new market for its alternative energy industry, and improve Israel's image in the developing world.

Right now, 97% of African people living in villages have no access to electricity. Jewish Heart for Africa provides solar panels to power solar refrigerators which allows clinics to store essential medicines and vaccines. The panels also power security lighting and indoor lighting which enables clinic staff to get rid of the dangerous kerosene lamps still used all over Africa. Solar panels also provide classrooms with electricity for the first time, meaning that learning can happen all day and after sunset. They can use the electricity to power radios and computers as well, in order to maintain contact with and teach children about the outside world. JHA builds solar-powered water pumping systems that provide clean water to thousands of people, creating a lasting, lifesaving and environmentally friendly impact on an entire community.

Depending on the project we decide to work on, we may be able to name a new clinic or classroom after our own temple. In this mission to transform the world, imagine all the starfish we can throw! Our Beth Avodah Israel tour group will be meeting the director of Jewish Heart for Africa in Jerusalem to learn more about the various ventures and then report back. We'll be the first temple in the greater Boston area doing this work, and CJP wants to partner with us once we select a project. [www.jhasol.org](http://www.jhasol.org) is the website that will explain much more about JHA.

The third new project is actually not so new. The Beth Avodah community organizing initiative has been growing for a couple of years. Many of you came to house meetings and shared your stories about things that trouble and/or worry you. As more and more stories were shared, Gary Abramson, Molly Zuker, Sam Schnieder, Stacy Swartz, Judi Cannon, Carole Rodenstein, Rich Blacker, Susan Michals and Suzanne Robbins have collated them and, as was announced at our annual meeting, the most prevalent issue concerned the health and welfare of our

young people, particularly as it relates to school. Since the summer, the committee has done a significant amount of research to learn more about how our concerns and the concerns of the schools converge and diverge. The TBA community organizing initiative committee will be presenting their findings soon. I am so deeply honored to work with this group of congregants, men and women who are truly committed to transforming this community in which most of us live.

In the meantime, our TBA community organizing initiative committee has been very involved with several other Newton congregations -- Jewish and Christian alike -- and as a result, our temple is hosting a special evening on October 14. Both Newton mayoral finalists, Setti Warren and Ruth Balser, will be responding to specific issues of concern raised by members and friends of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization and the Jewish Community Relations Council. The point is not to endorse a candidate -- that would be illegal and unethical. Our concern on the night of Oct. 14 is not who the next mayor of Newton will be. Our concern is that the next mayor will be accountable for promises made that night.

Last year we had 640 people participate in Mitzvah Day we would of course like to top that this year but we are far behind. We had about 400 people signed up at the same time last year. This year we are just short of 300. We of course would like this to be a community event and welcome friends and family not just temple members. Most of our projects still need volunteers. Here are some that I'd like to highlight.

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We are hosting a party at the Walker school which is an organization that provides a range of services to emotionally behaviorally, and learning disabled students and their families.

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Operation Military Kids is a national program that serves "suddenly military" youths whose parents were called up in the National Guard or Army Reserves. We will be filling back packs and enclose special messages of strength for these children while their parents are away.

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Family Table Distribution We will be going to JF & CS Headquarters in Waltham where we will be packing, sorting and delivering groceries and personal care items to Jewish homes in need throughout the Boston area.

Team Heart is an organization comprised of doctors and nurses who address the suffering of adolescents afflicted with advanced heart disease. We will be helping

them sort and shelve supplies in their warehouse in Dedham. These are just a few projects open to you. Sign up!

We used to be called the temple in the woods. That not only described our location and topography. It also to some extent accurately illustrated our slight remove from general community issues. Beth Avodah is now the temple in the clearing. We are stepping up in new ways, adopting new programs, moving in new directions, taking our role as leaders in our Jewish community more seriously, with greater confidence and with a clearer sense of what we're doing. My friends, the time to hesitate is through. We are in. Every one of us has a mission, an ambitious mission: to transform the world. It's up to each of us to identify that mission and then to see it through. Just because we may be comfortable, well off, untroubled, does not mean that we can stand idly by while our neighbor bleeds. Because your child thrives in the high pressure environment of Newton high schools does not mean that someone else's child is suffering. We're Jews: that's why we're here, in this sanctuary, in this world. Lo Alecha Hamlacha Ligmor, V'lo Atah Ben Chorin L'hibateil Mimeina, It is Not Your Duty to Complete the Work, Neither are you free to Desist From It.

It's time to throw starfish!