

Rabbi Jeremy Barras
Temple Beth El
Kol Nidre 5769

Stop Postponing the Messiah!

We Jews have been waiting for the Messiah for so long that many Jews today do not even believe it exists.

There was once a small Russian shtetl where life was very tough. There was always the threat of pogrom and very little work to be found. The Jews there prayed vigorously for the arrival of the Messiah when G-d would send a messenger to ease their pain and bring them redemption. One day the community council decided to hire a poor Jew to sit at the entrance to the shtetl and await the arrival of the Messiah. He was offered one ruble a day and having few other options, decided to take the job. Soon after the poor man's brother came to see him, and he was puzzled why his brother would take such a low paying job. Surely there must be a job somewhere that would pay at least a little more. When he asked his brother why he would take such a job, the poor man responded, "true the pay is low, but it is a very steady job."

Century after century Jews have prayed fervently for the coming of the Messiah. Through the pogroms and ghettos, the degradation and later the redemption, we Jews have held out hope that a better day was on the horizon.

Many of us though were taught, or have heard, that Reform Jews do not believe in the coming of the Messiah – that it is pointless to sit around and wait for something that will never come. But is that really what we believe? That we should give up hope that one day the world's problems will be solved and our fears will evaporate? I think that while we may not be waiting for a supernatural arrival, we each in the back of our minds believe that hope is worthwhile and that salvation is not just a child's dream. Solutions to the world's problems exist – we just have not found them all yet.

When we look to our faith, we see that according to the Principles of Reform Judaism, "[reform Jews] bring nearer the Messianic Age when we strive to fulfill the highest ethical mandates in our relationship with others." What does that mean? It means **Quite simply, Reform Jews tend to believe that a golden age amongst mankind will be brought on by people, and not by G-d. It will be a time when war no longer exists, when famine and hunger have been eradicated, and when all people live together in harmony.**

The famous Torah commentator Rashi notes that the sin of building the Tower of Babel story in the Book of Genesis was that the builders of the Tower believed that they could achieve a heavenly existence by fashioning an imposing structure rather than by living good and just lives. For that sin not only was their building destroyed, but the builders forfeited their place in the Messianic age as well. As the prophet Isaiah has

taught us, when our service of G-d is not authentic and proper, G-d responds to us, “Your offerings are offensive to me.” There are no short cuts towards achieving the ideal in our world. A better day is ahead of us, but we must join with G-d and each other to make it happen.

The rabbis in the Talmud were very concerned with the concept of the Messiah, and they also had theories of when it would come. One theory was that the Messiah has a preordained date for arrival, but every time a Jew brings sin into the world, the date of the Messiah’s arrival is pushed further back. And if we are to help curtail the Messiah’s postponement, then we must ask ourselves every year during these High Holy Days, what am I personally doing to **postpone** the arrival of the Messiah?

I am particularly fond of this theory because it requires each one of us to ponder our negative contributions to the world. **We should ask ourselves, is the world a better place because I am in it?** Do I make a difference in the lives of other people? Do I help to bring harmony to this world? Just like our Reform Principles state, the Messiah is brought nearer **when we seek to improve our relationships with each other**. How we treat each other has everything to do with what kind of world we live in. When we seek to make amends instead of find revenge, when we look for reconciliation rather than dwell on consequences, when we release our grudges and extend our hands in friendship, then we shall rightly be able to claim that we are actively pursuing the manifestation of our vision of a better world.

On this Kol Nidre, when we are so deeply concerned with our repentance and seeking amends with others, we should clearly take note of what it takes to heal the rifts that cause chaos in our spiritual cosmos, and bring with it the delay of our vision of a golden era. We must recognize where and when we have caused others to hurt, and then seek to bring healing in those relationships. Apologizing for our actions to those we have harmed is never easy. Simply picking up the phone and admitting that we are in the wrong does not seem so difficult, but how many of us do it? How many of us are willing to let go of our grudges, and replace them with resolutions and understanding. How many of us do not talk to others members of our families or old friends, because of something that happened so long ago we cannot even remember why the relationship was strained in the first place? For many, some of the most important people in our lives have become estranged, and for what? I have seen many relationships broken for the silliest of offenses or misunderstandings, and we get so enraged that our efforts to repair these rifts are often very lackluster. As one psychologist has put it, “when understanding is lacking, nothing very effective can take place.” And then the responsibility for causing ill will in our world lies squarely at our own doors.

As we go through life, some of our relationships seem to take on the same persona as that of the Cold War. We tend to alienate others by our coldness, or perceived coldness, or our simple lack of courtesy that we are commanded to extend to everyone, not matter who they are what they do, or where they’re from. There is an interesting story about Nikita Krushchev, who became First Secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953. When he was asked at a press conference

by a reporter what he was doing while Stalin was terrorizing the population, Krushchev, in a very stern tone, said, "Who said that?" All of a sudden the room was dead quiet – no one made even the slightest sound. After several seconds of complete quiet, Krushchev responded, "That's what I was doing during the Stalinist regime."

During that cruel period of human history, everyone suspected everyone of everything. Grudges were not dropped – they were dealt harshly with. People lived in fear of each other with good reason, and opportunities for reconciliation simply did not exist. Open and honest discussion was replaced by brutal suppression and authoritarianism.

We are fortunate not to live in such a dark time. We cannot use the excuse that our words and actions are limited by the environment in which we live. We have every opportunity to improve relations between each other, and we have no excuse to be unforgiving, to hold grudges or harbor ill will in our hearts for others. On this Kol Nidre, it is time for each one of us to ask ourselves how we can improve our relationships with our family, with our friends, with our coworkers, with those we do not trust, or those who do not trust us. It is time to drop those grudges we have been holding on to for far too long. I have heard people actually boast that when someone wrongs them, they never forget it. This is very antithetical to Jewish belief and physically unhealthy to the human body. As we read in the Torah quite succinctly, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."

The mitzvah of strengthening the bonds among humankind is one on which our Sages placed tremendous emphasis. In the Mishnah we are taught, "he who finds pleasure in the spirit of mankind, the spirit of G-d finds pleasure with him; but he who does not find pleasure in the spirit of mankind, the spirit of G-d finds no pleasure in him."

In her book *Holy Brother*, Yitta Mandelbaum records a story of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, the famous 20th century rabbi and troubadour. A particular man recalled driving the rabbi to a concert engagement in Pennsylvania. The drive was long, and after several minutes of conversation, Carlebach politely requested if the man would mind if sat quietly and studied Talmud.

The man later recalled, "knowing how hectic his life was and how rare the opportunity for private study must be, I assured him that I did not mind at all, and that he should please go ahead. He opened the Talmud with an enraptured look and was quickly immersed in its study....However, each time we pulled up to one of the many tollbooths we passed that day, he would snap out of his reverie, close the Talmud, look up at the tollbooth attendant, smile broadly, wave a greeting, and exchange a few words of friendship. No matter how ill-tempered or brusque the attendants appeared at the start, by the time Reb Shlomo had finished waving, smiling, and joking, they were transformed¹."

For Rabbi Carlebach, it was very important to make sure that those he came into contact with left his presence feeling good about themselves. In that way, he hoped to promote warmth and compassion between all of G-d's creatures.

That is a goal that we should all strive towards. And there are many ways to accomplish it. We can be proud that our congregation takes very seriously our responsibility to perform acts of tikkun olam within our greater community. From our Beth El for Babies program, our food drives, our upcoming Mitzvah Day celebration, and our various religious school and b'nei mitzvah Tzedakah projects, we have demonstrated our commitment to helping those less fortunate than us whenever and wherever we can.

But despite all this good work, it is not nearly enough, when we stop to realize, that a minority of the people are doing the majority of the work, and how much work is still left to be done. As we stand before G-d on this holy day, ask yourself, how many people who could use your help have you gone out of your way to help? Ushering on our conception of the Messiah is not something that happens by chance. It takes tremendous effort and a united commitment by each one of us to bring about changes for the better in our families, in our community, and throughout the world. If significant advances towards a golden age are to be made, then we each must look closely at ourselves, and ask, what am I doing to make the world a better place? This should make us feel a little uncomfortable, because if we are doing some we know we can do more, and if we are doing nothing then we should be ashamed – and the sound of the Shofar should be heard as a call to action.

I once knew a girl named Joy Greenberg who inspired many to seek to make the world a more humane place. Several years ago her father, a neonatologist, came to speak to her class about his work caring for sick and premature babies. After his talk, some of the kids in Joy's class approached her and asked if there was any way that they could help the babies and their families. Joy had always wanted to do something for them as well, and now she had the impetus and motivation to begin. She and her friends came up with the idea of collecting beanie babies and books to donate to the hospital. They were so successful in their collection that the hospital requested that they continue their work.

And that is exactly what they did. They created an organization through a local hospital called "Bundles of Joy" that aimed to provide aid and comfort to the sick babies and their families. Over the past few years, Joy and her friends have touched the lives of countless families and helped them to get through very tough periods in their lives. And their work has been contagious – they have inspired many other youth to contribute to their cause, and to use their abilities to contribute to the betterment of society.

Kabbalistic Judaism teaches that there are divine sparks within each one of us, and when we perform mitzvot such as Joy and her friends did, we release those sparks out into the world and allow them to affect the lives of others. The famous Rabbi, the Baal Shem Tov, taught, "All that belongs to a person, his/her household effects, business transactions, spouse and contemporaries – they all contain sparks of that person's soul that need to be lifted up." We each have G-d's presence inside of us, we were each created in the Divine image of G-d, and so we all have a responsibility to use our talents and abilities to make the world a better place for others.

Throughout our history Jews have yearned for that day when we will be redeemed by G-d, when, as we chant in the Aleinu, the Lord will be One and His Name shall be One. We should continue to yearn for that day, when peace and harmony exists between all man, when hatred and violence cease, when we are willing to drop the grudges that divide us, when we cease to gossip and spread vitriol amongst each other, when we recognize that each one of us has a soul that contains a spark of divinity. Maimonides taught us that we do not yearn for the Messiah so that the Jewish people, “will rule over the world or lord over the nations, or that we should eat, drink and be merry.” Rather, he saw the messianic period as a time when, “we will be free to engage in the study of Torah and its wisdom, and a time when there will be neither famine nor war, neither envy nor competition, for goodness will be freely bestowed.”

According to Jewish tradition, Elijah the prophet, wandered as a homeless person during his lifetime. Before he left this world, he announced that he would return once in every generation disguised as a poor, oppressed person, knocking at the doors of Jewish homes. How Elijah was treated would determine whether humanity was ready for the Messianic age.

This Yom Kippur let us all hear Elijah knocking on our door. Let the thumps ring loudly in our ears, and galvanize us to act to do our part to make our generation worthy of receiving the fruits of the Messianic age.

“Ani Ma’amin b’emunah shleimah b’viat hamashiach, v’af al pi sh’yitnameha, im kol zeh achakeh lo b’chol yom she’yavo – I believe with all my heart in the coming of the Messiah and although he may tarry, I will wait each and every day for his arrival.”

Kein Yehi Ratzon.
Let it be G-d’s will.
Amen