

We celebrate Rosh Hashanah as the birthday of the world, *hayom harat olam*, and we take time to ask ourselves three key questions: How are you doing? What troubles you? How can you help yourself live a better life by making better choices?

I suggest that we should take a wider lens on Rosh Hashanah than just asking **ourselves** those questions. I want us to ask them of the community around us. Ahavas Israel, how are you doing? What troubles you? What can I do to help? Grand Rapids, how are you doing? What troubles you? What can I do to help?

Ahavas Israel has been a Grand Rapids congregation for all of its more than 125 years. We are in the city and part of the city. We rise and fall with the city. As the city grows and prospers, so do we. If the city flounders and fails, we suffer. If the city, or neighborhoods within it, struggles with racism, with crime, or with poverty, we suffer.

Our Torah tells us **V'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha**, 'love your neighbor as yourself,' and our religious nature has evolved so that we understand the concept of neighbor to transcend religious, ethnic, and racial divides. If you live in Grand Rapids, you are my neighbor. Your fate is my fate. When my neighbor falls into poverty, it damages my city and it damages me. My sense of love for my neighbor compels me to engage with my community.

Our mandate to act beyond ourselves is rooted in the Torah's notion of **B'tzelem Elohim Bara, B'tzalmeinu kidmuteinu**. We are the image of God, created in the likeness of God. We are reflections of God. To ask the question, 'why does God allow suffering in the world' is the equivalent of asking why do we allow suffering? Don't ask, 'Why doesn't God do something?' Ask, 'why don't we do something?' We are God's hands and God's feet. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel famously said when I march [with the Reverend King], my feet are praying. When we do a mitzvah that nourishes the world, we are acting for God. As much as *tzelem Elohim* is a mandate to see others as images of God and treat them accordingly, it is a mandate to see ourselves as extensions of God, and act accordingly.

It is in the best interest of Congregation Ahavas Israel to be involved in the civic life of Grand Rapids. It is an extension of our fundamental values as Jews and as a congregation of Jews to do so.

We have several small social action projects that we are currently involved in that connect us to our larger community.

- The Corners of the Field garden on the Northeast side of the building grows food for the Temple Emanuel Food bank and the Baxter Community Center.
- We are a support congregation for the Family Promise of Grand Rapids, helping Trinity Lutheran church feed families who find safe shelter in the church about four times a year.
- We participate in the National Wildlife Federation Sacred Grounds program with All Souls Congregation, and have devoted a piece of our property behind the social hall to be a native plant and wildlife habitat.
- We are a member of the Grand Rapids Climate Resolution Coalition, working towards achieving community-wide carbon neutrality for Grand Rapids by 2030.

And to this list I am adding one more new project. While Grand Rapids is for the most part rated as an outstanding place to live, certain zip codes and neighborhoods have been left out of the rising development and general prosperity of the city. The Center for Community Transformation is a collection of organizations in the 49507 zip code working primarily with young people of color. Their mission is to develop, rebuild, and restore that sector of our city,

and see all people flourish. They help young people who have not graduated High School earn their GED. They help develop job skills. They teach young people entrepreneurial skills, to go out and use their talents to start businesses in their neighborhoods. Beginning this fall, Congregation Ahavas Israel will become a support organization, encouraging you to volunteer your time as personal or professional mentors, academic tutors, or vocational trainers. They are seeking mechanics, cooks, carpenters, event planners, accountants, and other business professionals to volunteer and share their knowledge.

Rosh Hashanah teaches us the value of **compassion, rahmanut**. God has compassion for Hagar, for Sarah, for Isaac, for Ishmael. My soul was fortunate to be placed in the body of a baby born into a comfortable middle-class family. In the hospital where I was born, there were also children born whose families did not have the resources to offer them the education or experiences that shaped my childhood and young adulthood, that allowed me to go to pursue bachelor's and master's degrees and more, and to spend a year studying in Israel and traveling around the Middle East and Europe. There was no significant difference between me and the next baby over in the nursery of that hospital. You are not born into poverty because you are stupid, incapable, or incompetent. Our tradition teaches us to have compassion for those who are at a disadvantage, and help level the playing field by giving them the education and skills they need to succeed.

We offer our support with **humility, anavah**. Pastor Artie Lindsay, founder of the Center for Community Transformation, has built the organization to sow the seeds of salvation from within the neighborhood. They have the vision, they are building the program. They know how to accomplish their goal, which is to help young people lift themselves out of poverty. They need people with certain skills to support them. The program managers will be our guides and instructors, and we will be like Moses, who served God and the people with humility.

The goal of this partnership is not just to share our skills where needed, but to form a real relationship with the people who run the Center and those who are served by the Center. It is to form bonds of relationship, friendship, and understanding, with the residents of a different part of the city because we are all part of one community. The teacher learns from the student. As we share our talents, we learn about the talents, interests, and dreams of our students.

The first step to get involved in this program is to tell me of your interest and willingness to learn more. I'll set up tours of the facility and introduce you to some of the people who make it work. They'll help find a place where your talents will be useful. My goal is to see members of Ahavas Israel live our Jewish values in the community, whether by growing food in our garden, feeding people through Family Promise, caring for the ecology of our grounds, making Grand Rapids a leader in fighting climate change, or serving an organization to lift neighborhoods out of poverty. Look in the synagogue email and in the October Voice for a list of these projects along with someone to contact for more information.

Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time to ask those three questions: How are you doing? What troubles you? What can I do to help? And respond in the manner of our tradition, with compassion and humility, *rahmanut* and *anava*, and with a sense of justice borne of creation in God's image, *tzelem Elohim*, and loving one's neighbor. *Hayom harat olam*, today is a new day in creation. Welcome it with an open heart.