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The Season for Repair
(Ps. 145; Deuteronomy. 6:16-6:25)

I once worked with a rabbi who was tongue-tied in public. Yet, he was one of the most articulate people I have ever known. He spoke with his hands. During the month before Rosh Hashanah, a month dedicated to preparation for the New Year, he walked around the Hillel building with a shofar, a ram's horn, in one hand and a hammer in the other. In the morning, he blew the shofar to wake up everyone within earshot to the urgency of this season of repentance. Then, swinging his hammer, he fixed cabinets, desks and doors. Curious people stopped to ask him why he had traded in the Torah for a toolbox. "It's the season for repair," he would quietly answer, and pound in another nail with those skilled hands. It was from him that I learned how truly eloquent hands could be.

The writer of the Psalms (145) proclaimed: "Potayach et yadecha u'masbia l'chol chai ratzon." "You open your hand to care for the needs of every living creature."

Potayach et yadecha--Open your hand. Leonard Nimoy, of Star Trek fame, tells the story of playing at the water's edge as a young boy. Suddenly an undertow knocked him off his feet and began to carry him out to sea. When he reached out to grab the child closest to him, the boy, thinking he was playing, pushed him away. Flailing desperately and losing his last bit of strength, he suddenly felt a hand grasping his wrist and pulling him to safety. Out of nowhere, a teenage girl had appeared. With water pouring from his nose and mouth, he managed to thank her before she dove into the water. "I consider to this day, that my life was saved by someone who reached out a hand in a moment of caring. It was my first such rescue, but not my last." Nimoy reflected.

"Potayach et yadecha" Sometimes when we open our hand to help, it's for a dramatic rescue, like Nimoy's. More often we seize the limitless opportunities to open our hands in acts of kindness, to make a crucial human connection, to see and satisfy a need in its proper time.

Ours are the hands that deliver a meal to a mourner. Ours are the hands that comfort a frightened child. Ours are the hands that smooth the hair of a bedridden parent. Ours are the hands that dial the long distance phone number of a friend in crisis.

Ours are also the hands that receive. Surely we recognize that sometimes ours are the hands that give, and sometimes we are the ones reaching out for help. "From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share and from this we live." I learned this chant while dancing in a worship circle, grasping another person's hand with each round until we had touched the entire community. "From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share and from this we live."

This simple chant and dance conveys the truth that God endows us with the strength, the capacity and the responsibility to help and to receive from others. "From you I receive, to you I give. Together we share and from this we live." By reaching out to one another, we are called upon to be God's hands.

In Talmud Sotah (14a), Rabbi Hama teaches, "Just as God clothed Adam and Eve when they were naked, so we must clothe the naked. Just as God visited Abraham when he was healing from his circumcision, so we must visit the sick. Just as God comforted Isaac after the death of his mother Sarah, so we must comfort mourners."

Imitating God in this way is so highly valued that the "Ethics of the Fathers", the best-known Talmudic text, asserts, "The whole world is sustained by three things: by the study of God's word, by worship and by deeds of loving-kindness".

If only it were true. If only it were enough. I used to believe that deeds of compassion and loving-kindness could sustain the world. I used to believe that we could live from our sharing with one another. I used to teach these texts, buoyed by how many generous hands reached out to those in need. I know that working one-on-one with a child to teach him to read makes a palpable difference. I know that each and every deed of loving-kindness, each act of compassion animates the divine in the giver and in the one who receives. I know that for those of us blessed with so much, volunteering opens our eyes to a reality beyond

our own, intensifies our gratitude, and, hopefully, reduces our sense of entitlement. I know that helping another human being, is a transcendent calling.

But more and more, especially this year, I've come to believe that the practice of loving-kindness--while admirable, while generous, while necessary-- has an inadvertent and unacknowledged down side. It has precipitated a kind of self-congratulatory apathy vis a vis the bigger picture in our country. Listen to these statistics: While 80% of today's high school students and 61% of undergraduates performed community service in the last year, only 14% were involved in any political organization, only 9% worked on a political campaign, and only one-third of their total numbers were registered and planned to vote. Community service, volunteering, deeds of loving-kindness, assuages our conscience but allows monumental injustices to multiply all around us. As we and our children busily shed light on small dark corners, impacting dozens or even hundreds, we blithely allow the passage of laws, the appointment of judges, the enactment of policies that will, I believe, adversely impact all 300 million Americans for decades to come.

For his honors thesis, Stanford undergraduate Brady Gordon interviewed 41 student leaders affiliated with the Haas Center for Public Service. This is what he heard, in one form or another, from these dedicated leaders of service organizations.

"I'm not a political person. I'm not self-interested or manipulative in the way politicians are. I don't have an agenda to push. When things get political it kind of messes things up, bringing in issues that aren't really relevant. I think if you are associated with being political--out there protesting for a side--then you are assumed to not know anything."

Remember-- these are some of our community's most dedicated student activists. Their responses educate us all. Civic engagement has become defined as individual acts of loving-kindness--working in a soup kitchen, clearing trash from a river, tutoring a child. What is missing is an awareness of the connection between the individual, isolated problems these actions are intended to address and the larger world of public policy¹.

If we have gravitated toward these deeds of compassion rather than entering the political fray because we believe that politics is partisan and borne of self-interest; if we have turned away because politics is inaccessible, cynical and ugly; if we think that "politician" is an epithet; then for us, this is the season for repair. We can no longer turn away. This is a decisive moment in our democracy. When our contributions go only as far as deeds of loving-kindness, but no farther; when we are satisfied to make change one-on-one, but are repelled by the grittiness of politics, we discover a terrible irony. We have allowed our acts of loving-kindness to become a substitute for democracy. Through our compassion, we have unwittingly created a vacuum into which those who would dismantle democracy rush in. Through our compassion, we have become complicit in paving the way for demise of democracy.

A dear friend lost her father this past May. About a month before he died, she sat with him while he completed the form to receive an absentee ballot. He was already very ill and blind but still determined to fulfill the civic responsibility he had embraced faithfully for all the years of his adult life. "This election will help me hang on 'til November!" he promised. She guided his hand to the proper box and watched as he shakily signed his name. "And if I don't make it 'til November," he said, "don't tell anyone.

Don't we owe it to her dad and others like him to remember the wisdom of those who came before us? We all have stories of those tireless advocates of the last generation who labored on the front lines of the battles for civil rights, for workers' rights, for a social safety net. They understood that democracy works only when we the people take hold of our political process with strong hands.

And now it's our turn. Each of us must use our strong hands to cradle a democracy in need of repair. There are those who are uncomfortable hearing this. I have been accused of being a partisan for speaking out about politics. I have been told that politics does not belong on the pulpit, that religion should be about heart and spirit. Friends, I speak today, I speak at this political season, not because I wish to divide, but because I believe we are at a critical junction in our nation. I believe that if words of the spirit are not also spirited, they are, in the

phrase of Ecclesiastes, hevel hevalim, 'vanity of vanities'. This moment, like the civil rights movement before it, cries out for a religious response. Surely, then, congregants were uncomfortable with their rabbis' and ministers' insistence that religion demands justice along with care for the heart and soul. This moment, too, cries out for justice. This time, too, calls for reawakening to the ideals of democracy and freedom that are the foundation of this country. This is the season for repair.

We need to do more than to reach out our hands. When the Israelites needed redemption from Egypt, God reached out with a yad hazakah u'vizroah netuyah (Deut.4: 34), a strong hand and an outstretched arm. God extended a strong hand that wrenched the Israelites from slavery, and an outstretched arm that bound them together as a people capable of marching toward freedom. When the prophets of old saw people attending to their own wealth while the poor languished, they spoke out forcefully against selfishness and arrogant leadership.

As in ancient times, so too today: when division and deception reign, when voices of dissent are silenced, when only the powerful find protection, when the truth is distorted and sullied in spin and sound bites, a gentle hand is not enough. In this season for repair, we must now, today, with yadayim chazakot, with strong hands, boldly take hold of the proud prophetic tradition inspiring to Jews and Christians alike. We must, with outstretched arms, become passionate, active, and relentless advocates for real and lasting change.

I wish it could go without saying today that every one of us here who is over 18 MUST vote. I wish it could go without saying, but with two-thirds of young adults not currently registered, and many older potential voters cynical or cavalier about this sacred responsibility, there is much work to be done. The deadline for registering is October 18. In the next two weeks, register to vote.

And in the weeks that follow, prepare to vote. As citizens with a critical stake in the direction of our country, we must not be deceived by a media blitz of half-truths and fictions. Today's culture projects image over substance. What we see televised would have us believe

that the safety of the world depends on the outcome of a schoolyard brawl between two bullies going mano a mano. Today's culture depends upon voters to be fearful, lazy and gullible. Don't allow it. Rather than partisan pap, let us respond to the clarion call of our shared religious tradition--a tradition that demands we look beneath the surface of every issue, a tradition that demands that we **not** vote our pocketbooks, that we **not** vote on single issues, and a tradition that requires us to uphold the social covenant to protect the vulnerable. That covenant speaks with remarkable clarity to contemporary issues with words written two millennia ago:

On the environment: In the Midrash, God warns Adam in the Garden of Eden: Take care not to foul or destroy my world. For if you do, there will be none to repair it after you."

On the economy: You who are blessed with wealth, the prophet Isaiah commands: "shall unlock the shackles of injustice..make sacrifices for the hungry and shelter the homeless."

On fair and verifiable elections: Leviticus teaches: "You shall not pervert justice with unfair measures."

On war and peace: "Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace."

There are those who would claim the exclusive religious voice on these issues. They have sent out letters asserting that "liberals" seek to ban the Bible; they have handed over church rosters to political parties; they have gotten elected to school boards in order to teach Creationism; they have passed laws where the rights of the unborn supercede the rights of women. But, remember--ours, too, is a religious voice. We have offered our open and caring hands, our minds and our bodies, our inventiveness and our loyalty, because we believe America is a place where justice can be pursued anew in every generation. Ours too is a religious voice.

The first weeks of this new academic year offer us a critical moment in our history to use our hands with both compassion and strength. Take a look at your hands--the hands you will soon stretch out to one another in the passing of the peace, the hands that have given and received care. In the coming days and weeks, look again at your strong hands as you use those them with new resolve--

to dial voters in swing states; use those hands to drive people to the polls, to sign petitions, to call our elected officials, to insist upon the right of every eligible citizen to vote--whatever their race or ethnicity--and for secure and verifiable ballots, in every state in our union and for our citizens overseas. Use your hands to take hold of an issue close to your heart and advocate for repair.

The list of issues on the table is long and varied. Each will help to determine the direction of our democracy in the months and years to come.

America's image abroad, the ballooning budget deficit, civil liberties, education, the environment, gun control, health care, hunger and homelessness, Israel, jobs creation, prisoner abuse, reinstating the draft, same sex marriage, separation of church and state, stem cell research, threats of terror, war in Afghanistan, war in Iraq, women's right to choose.

Every one of these issues and more now hang in the balance of our national debate. How will we respond? As Elie Wiesel once said, "Is silence the answer? It never was."

Rather, our hands, too, must be eloquent in crafting our future. This is the season for repair. When this intense, polarizing election is over, whatever the outcome, we cannot turn away again or lose our passion for real change, even for the good work of loving-kindness. Where our country's ideals have been frayed, let us make repair.

With open hands, with strong hands, let us labor for the real change our traditions demand of us. As the Psalmist prays, U'maaseh yadenu konnenuhu -- May the work of our hands be established. May God bless the work of our hands.

Ken yehi ratzon. So may this be the will of God.

This sermon was co-authored with my dear colleague, Rabbi Judy Shanks

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ⁱ Della Carpini, Michael. "The Disengaged Generation: Evidence and Potential Solutions." Keynote address at the President's Leadership Colloquium, University of Pennsylvania. June 26, 2000. Page 7. Quoted in Brady Gordon's "Alternative Politics or Alternative to Politics?: Investigating Service as a Form of Political Engagement"