

Last night we talked about messages: the messages we get from other people and the messages we get from God that we can easily pass off as coincidences. But there are some messages that we cannot ignore. There are messages that flood our brain with images, emotions and chaos. Anytime we open a newspaper or turn on the news we hear of: the war on terrorism, the civil-war in Iraq, the prolonged war in Afghanistan, the feared nuclear program of Iran, the nuclear threat of North Korea, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, the riots in Budapest, the KKK rally in Amarillo, Global warming, pollution, starvation, poverty, disease - even spinach isn't safe any more.

There is only so much fear one person can handle. Like a computer with too many programs running or a circuit breaker with too many appliances, our natural reaction is to crash, to blow a fuse, to shutdown. Emotions and concerns drain out of us, until we are left with an empty feeling of apathy.

Of course, we could just not follow the news. We could turn off the TV, the radio, and the computer. We can close the newspaper. Although like an ostrich with its head in the sand, just because we can ignore what's going on, doesn't mean that we are not still affected by it. How can a military struggle on the other side of the world affect me here in Amarillo? We know the answer to this every time we fill up our cars at the gas-station.

But, of course, it goes beyond the strain on our wallet. It affects the air we breath, the water we drink, the food we eat. It fills our lives with a sense of fear and danger. Is this the world in which we want to live? Is this he world we want to leave to our children?

There was a time in the not so distant past when the world was drenched with apathy. Although there were some who tried to speak out, most of those uninvolved were quick to say "It's not our problem. It's far away from here. There's nothing I can do." But it was precisely this overriding indifference that fed the flames of this fire, the fire of the Holocaust.

There is a famous poem that illustrates the dangers of apathy at this time, written by Pastor Martin Niemöller:

"First they came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the Communists and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me."

People did not speak out when it did not affect them. It only mattered to them when their own lives where in danger. Today, we all wish they had stepped forward sooner, that they had cared. This unfathomable evil affected all of us and our families, even if we weren't physically there. It forever changed the face of the Jewish people and will forever remain in our memories. We tell ourselves, "Never again." Like a mantra trying

to wake our slumbering consciences into action. We need to learn from the mistakes of the past and not be as indifferent as they were.

Elie Wiesel, who saw first hand the horrors of the Holocaust expressed these words:

“The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.

The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference.

The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference.

And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.”

Even when we hate something, we still care strongly enough about it to have an intense emotion. Hate and love are two sides of the same coin. It is apathy that removes the very life-force from us, and tries to convince us that we play no part in this world.

But, its easy to stand here and speak of times past. It is easy to look back and recognize that the world should have been more involved. It should have stood up and put a stop to the atrocities sooner. Hindsight, they say, is 20/20.

The challenge is to look in the mirror today and say, “I must do something about what’s going on in the world.” And yet, this is no simple task. There is so much wrong in the world, we tell our selves, “What can I really do? I’ll just mind my own business.”

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the greatest Jewish thinkers of our time, said: “There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and in turn being accepted.”

Our lack of reaction, of outrage, is a silent acceptance. When a child does something they fear is wrong and look to us expecting punishment, if we say nothing, we are in fact saying it is okay. When our society is filled with injustices and ills, if we do nothing we are a part of the problem, not of the solution.

Rabbi Heschel, a fierce enemy of apathy, sees this problem and its solution in the prophets of our past: Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and more. He proclaims:

“The prophets remind us of the moral state of a people:

Few are guilty, but all are responsible.

If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the spirit of society, an individual’s crime discloses society’s corruption. [However] in a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, continually concerned for God and every person, crime would be infrequent rather than common.”

Our very attitude towards life, the way we approach our world, has a powerful affect on shaping it. But it begins at home.

Have you ever come home from a long day to find a messy house or dishes that need washing? We tell ourselves, “I’m too tired now. I’ll do it later when I have more energy.” This is a typical reaction, but we are not accomplishing anything at all. We are merely placing the work on ourselves in the future. For the dishes continue to pile up and the mess in the house compounds, until we find ourselves facing it once again, with even less energy than we had before. We might even curse ourselves of the past for not just doing it then.

Before I leave town for the weekend, amidst the packing and last minute details, I try to push myself to clean up my apartment. I certainly don’t have the time or the energy, but I try to consider myself of the future. I know when I get back I’m even more exhausted than when I left, and its so nice coming back to a clean place. I try to motivate myself by imagining that I am giving myself-in-the-future a gift. And when I do return, I thank myself-in-the-past for having already done the work.

While cleaning my apartment is trivial compared to cleaning up the environment or repairing the world, this approach helps me to develop a productive mindset. The problems of the world won’t go away if we ignore them, if anything we are making it even harder on ourselves-in-the-future and our children. As a people, as a human race, we can give ourselves-of-the-future a gift, by caring today.

Already, there are people in this community that serve as examples of what it means to care. People volunteer their time, donate money and other services. These are all great contributions to the world and they should be lauded and commended. Now the rest of us need to catch up, and we **all** need to try to do a bit more than we already do. One donation doesn’t free us from caring for the rest of the year. Our own commitments to justice don’t alleviate the need for others to be involved, as well. If we each strive to do one more thing to help make the world a better place, and to inspire 2 other people to do the same, we can start a chain-reaction of goodness in the world.

There is a lot of work to be done. So much so, that it may seem overwhelming. Fortunately, our tradition has an answer for us in Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of our Fathers:

Lo Aleicha Hamlacha ligmor, v’lo ata bein chorin le’hibatel mimena.

You are not obligated to complete the task, yet neither are you free to desist from it.

You may have even heard a modern spin of this concept: Think Globally, act locally.

We can’t care about everything, but we have to care about something.

All it takes is one pebble to disturb the lake of apathy.

All it takes is one candle to illuminate a room filled with darkness.

We need to shake off the shackles of apathy

and free ourselves of the paralysis of indifference.

Fortunately, our tradition can help us. Especially during this season of awe. It is a message we cannot ignore, swelling up from the earth, and reaching our very core. The shofar blast is the wake-up call from thousands of years ago, ringing true today and into the future, reminding us that we need to care.