

Becoming *That* People

Last month, April Akiva and I attended a local meeting called the Homeless Providers' Forum. The seats in the room were filled, so we stood together in the back, leaning against a wall. This monthly gathering is attended by people from all over Orange County who service the homeless. At the meeting's conclusion, attendees stood up one at a time to introduce themselves.

"Hello, I work with homeless single mothers between the ages of 18 and 25 and their children. We have an eight bed facility with no beds open," one woman stated firmly. She looked right and another man stood up.

"We have two beds open for single men in a twenty bed facility. Our guests must be clean and sober for 90 days and employable."

"We will soon have two new affordable houses for working low income families built. If you have people you know who qualify, please, please see me afterwards."

On and on, person by person, story by story, noble description after noble description.

I began to shift on my dansko clogs. A bit sheepishly, surrounded by people doing the hard, important work of ongoing advocacy and service, I said, "Hello, my name is Rabbi Jocce Hudson and I am from Temple Beth Sholom in Santa Ana."

Next.

The meeting ended. The facilitator clasped her hands and said, "Now is the time for you all to network."

April and I stood frozen, looking at each other. We knew no one in the room. Now what?

No sooner were the words, "Should we just go?," formulated in my mind, then we were swarmed.

There were business cards wildly being pulled from people's pockets. A woman showed me her Star of David necklace and said how nice it was to have some of "her people" at the meeting. Another woman grasped my hands and said she would pray for the Jews of Israel. "Will you sit on our committee," another woman asked, "we have been trying and trying to find someone Jewish to work with us."

"Here's my card."

"Here's my card."

“Here’s my card.”

At some point, April turned to me and said, “I ran out of business cards.” We began crossing my name of my cards and putting her name instead.

Forty-five minutes later, April and I left the building. I turned to April and the first words out of my mouth were “I am so embarrassed.” “My words exactly,” she said.

April and I ended up at the Homeless Providers’ Forum largely by chance. In preparation for the religious school’s social justice focus on Homelessness this year, I spent much of my summer building connections with people who work with the homeless community of Orange County. One of them recommended this meeting to me. “This is *the* place where people who provide services to homeless men, women, and children gather. If you want to learn about work with the homeless in Orange County, this is where to go,” she said.

Temple Beth Sholom was the only Jewish organization or synagogue or Jewish communal agency represented in the room. I remember the woman’s words, “This is *the* place where people who provide services to the homeless gather.”

I guess we aren’t *that* people.

There is a man who lives on my street. I see him every morning when I walk. In the evenings, when we go out for dinner or to the grocery store or to get a cup of coffee at the local Coffee Bean, we see him. When I say that this man, whose name I don’t know, lives on my street, I mean that literally. He lives *on* the street.

This man is not lucid. He suffers from a mental illness whose diagnosis is unknown to me. He has a shopping cart filled with belongings that he tips over at night as a sort of fort. In the morning, he sips coffee from a cup he sets gingerly inside a planter. When the Griffith Park fires tore through the mountains above our neighborhood, he howled like an animal.

Except he is not an animal. He is a man, whose face I can see clearly when I close my eyes. He is a man with a story and a childhood and a life. He is a man who is clearly sick. And he just lives there. On the street. On my street. And I see him everyday. And I have no idea even what to do.

There is this song that is popular with our youth. It’s called the *B’tzelem Elohim* song and when the kids sing it they jump up and down and dance and smile. “When I reach out to you and you to me, Each one of us *b’tzelem Elohim*.”

B’tzelem Elohim. In the image of God.

When God created *adam*, the first human, God created *adam* “*b’tzelem Elohim*,” in God’s own image. From this basic teaching, we, as Jews, have come to believe that we are all created in the image of God.

And so, I am left, with a problem. As I look around our broken world, where is God?

Two weeks ago, I saw a family of four sitting outside a van, which was filled with bed sheets and pillows. These people were sleeping in their van on the streets of Santa Ana right near the train station. They were just stopped there, the mom shaking out sheets and the children playing in the parkway. This family, by their very existence, provided me with evidence that God is in our world.

I thought to myself: God, too, is now homeless.

This sort of thinking is not new. When the First Temple was destroyed, the Prophet Jeremiah suggested that God went into exile, just like the people of Judah.

Jewish mystics, in a theology that became popular in the wake of Jewish expulsion from Spain, argued that God too was in exile, broken off from our world.

It is not just that we are made in the image of God. But, we also come to understand God from the vocabulary, experiences, and stories of our lives. We may be made in God’s image, but we see God from our images.

So, what does it mean to imagine God as homeless?

It means that the Divine is looking for shelter. And we, in God’s image, are yearning for God’s Sheltering Presence.

It means that God is scrounging to find basic nourishment. And so we, in God’s image, are searching for Divine sustenance.

It means that the Holy One, Creator of all, is often unwashed. And so, too, our souls often feel impure.

I was reading the LA Times a couple weeks ago and stumbled on an article about a newish phenomenon of both religious and secular online confession sites. On these websites, with a comfortable veil of anonymity, individuals can confess their sins publicly.

As I read this article, something crunched in my stomach. These sites create a culture of easy absolution. They encourage us to consider what we feel guilty about, to share our shortcomings with others, and then to move on.

It goes without saying that this sort of confession is decidedly un-Jewish. For us, the prescribed acts of *teshuvah*, of seeking forgiveness, require us to ask forgiveness directly from a person we have wronged and then, when put into a similar situation again, to choose to act differently.

On a deeper level, though, I realize these sites encourage us to focus only on our own individual wrongdoings. I have done X and I feel bad about it. I have done Y and I wish I hadn't. The essential issue with this mode of thinking is that it completely overlooks the need for communal reflection and communal *teshuvah*.

What about what we have done? What about what we haven't done?

The issue with these websites is that there is no we. Life is certainly easier when we only have to answer for ourselves. It's just that it's a lot lonelier too.

The benefits of being a part of a congregation like Temple Beth Sholom are obvious. We have a we. In our times of joy and in our times of sorrow. We have each other. But, being a part of a community also means we have an obligation to one another and, I would suggest, to our broader community.

During these High Holy Days, each of us has a sacred obligation not only to consider what you or I as an individual wish that you or I had done differently, but, we, together, have a sacred obligation to consider what we want to do differently in the coming year.

These Days of Awe are not meant to fill us with despair and guilt, but with inspiration and a sense of purpose.

I imagine my own online confession:

At night, when I turn on my porch light and set my security alarm, the man who lives on my street burrows under blankets and an old coat.

or

I have begun to conceptualize God as homeless.

If I typed these words onto my computer, they would be the same as the words I speak today. The difference? Once recognized communally, my responsibility to do something changes.

Yes, as human beings, I believe we have a moral responsibility to respond to the suffering we encounter. As Jews, I believe we have a spiritual responsibility to respond to that same suffering.

Last Mitzvah Day, I, along with a number of families from Temple Beth Shalom, did some gardening over at the Catholic Workers' House, a homeless shelter, in Santa Ana. Toward the end of our shift, we were invited to join other volunteers and the homeless guests for a meal. I watched with a deep sense of kavod, of honor, as TBS congregants—men, women, and children—served a hot meal to homeless members of our Orange County community. As the TBS volunteers handed the guests their plates, they smiled, told them to enjoy their meal, and even sat down to chat a bit. In that moment, I sensed a deep sukkah of holiness settling over our work.

In that moment, I thought, God is surely in this place.

In that moment I thought, thank God we are too.

This year at Temple Beth Shalom, the social action committee and the religious school will be offering the community opportunities to learn, act, give, and pray on issues of homelessness. I warmly invite you to join us.

Shanah Tovah.