



Rosh Hashanah, Day One, 5775
Save Somebody Else
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We have all just emerged from a summer without summer. For many of us, there was a constant cloud in our summer skies because of what was happening in Israel.

There is no need now to replay how hard and horrible this war was; how tragic was the loss of innocent life on both sides, the Israeli soldiers and civilians, and the Palestinian civilians who were so badly served by Hamas; or how scary and painful was the wave of anti-Semitism that it unleashed.

I would like to ask a single question about this war which has to do with Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah is supposed to be a happy, hopeful holiday. It is the birthday of the world. A time of rebirth and renewal. New possibilities.

And yet, how does that square with the reality of Hamas in Gaza? We like hope. But we also like to live in the real world. When it comes to Gaza, is it possible to have hope and also live in the real world?

This was, after all, Israel's *third* war with Hamas in *six* years. Operation Cast Lead. Operation Pillar of Defense. Operation Protective Edge. There is exactly nobody in the world who is optimistic that we have resolved the problem. Israel's Hamas problem is *intractable*. We *had* the problem of Hamas last year, we *have* the problem of Hamas this year, and *we will have* the problem of Hamas next year.

The Israeli metaphor is mowing the lawn. We cannot *solve* the problem. We can only *manage* it. If so, *what happened to that fresh start?*

This is an Israeli and a Jewish dilemma. But in different ways it is also a human and a universal dilemma. *All of us* face our own intractable dilemmas.

We are managing some persistent health challenge, some physical ailment. It is not going to go away. We cannot solve it. We manage it. *We had* it last year, *we have* it this year, *we will have* it next year. *What happened to that fresh start?*

We really miss our loved one who died. The ache and the emptiness, the quiet of the empty house, do not go away. *We had* it last year, *we have* it this year, *we will have* it next year. *What happened to that fresh start?*

Many of us are blessed to have aging parents. The good news is that many of our seniors are living longer. In one week this past year I buried three beloved matriarchs ages 99, 102 and 102 and a half. But life in these senior years is seldom easy. The challenges don't get easier, and they don't get solved. They get managed. *We had* it last year, we hope and pray that we *have* it this year, we hope and pray that we *will have* it next year. *What happened to that fresh start?*

What wisdom does our tradition have for our problem right now: dealing with intractable dilemmas?

The tractate Berakhot relates a series of intersecting stories where sage A is sick; sage B comes to visit sage A; sage A recovers. And then sage B himself becomes sick.

Rabbi Chiya was ill. Rabbi Yochanan visited him. Rabbi Chiya got better.

In the next frame, Rabbi Yochanan himself falls ill. A third rabbi, Rabbi Chanina, visited him, which led to Rabbi Yochanan getting better.

The Talmud asks the obvious question: Rabbi Yochanan had the power to revive spirits. After all, he revived the spirits of Rabbi Chiya. If he could revive Rabbi Chiya's spirits, why

doesn't he revive his own? The Talmud answers: *ein chavush matir atzmo mibeit ha'asurim*. A prisoner cannot release himself from prison. We all need somebody else to let us out. Meaning that there are times when we cannot solve our own problems, but we can still save somebody else.

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story that once he visited a man who had just lost his wife of 40 years. The rabbi came during the middle of the day when no one else was around, and this recent widower bared his soul. The joy of my life is gone. For 40 years it has been my wife, my life. My wife, my life. Now I have no wife. Now I have no life. The man was inconsolable.

Just then, the phone rang. The man picks up the phone, and it turns out that the person on the other end of the line called to let him know that *he* had just lost *his* loved one. Suddenly this man who had lost his wife of 40 years could somehow summon the will to be helpful to somebody else. His voice, which had been weak, grew strong as he listened to his friend and reassured him that he was not alone, and that he still had much to live for. The man could not save himself, but even from his own shiva house he could save somebody else.

When we face an intractable dilemma, we have a choice.

We can give up. What's the point? Our dilemma is intractable. We cannot solve it.

Or we can save somebody else. Whatever else we *can't* do, we can always make somebody else's day.

Israel cannot solve the problem of Hamas. And yet, this intractable dilemma does not stop Israel from saving somebody else.

I can prove this with just one word. Ebola.

West Africa has an Ebola problem. The Ebola epidemic has killed more than 2,400 people in West Africa since March, and terror at the spread of this disease has spread as well.

Who can forget the picture of the dead man, a victim of Ebola, who lay unburied on the streets of Liberia because people were terrified of touching him, lest they contract the deadly virus.

Israel does not have an Ebola problem. But Israel does have a scientist named Dr. Leslie Lobel, a leading pathogens expert at Ben-Gurion University, who has been working for the past 12 years to develop one day a vaccine for this virus. Five times a year, Dr. Lobel goes with his Ben Gurion university team to meet with 120 survivors of Ebola in Uganda. What can the natural immune system of these Ebola survivors teach us?

Could you imagine going to Uganda, to meet with Ebola survivors, *five times a year*?

Most others are running away from Ebola. This team of Israelis is running towards it.

These are Dr. Lobel's words:

I protect myself with anti-malaria pills and antibiotics and meet with survivors who were infected at least three months before but survived and are healthy. I study their immune systems to find out why they survived and others didn't. The answer could be genetic or environmental...

I don't cover myself when I talk to them so I can gain their trust. I go in as a proud Israeli and am very respectful of them.

Dr. Lobel believes that he and his team are three to five years away from a vaccine. They cannot solve Gaza. But they are working hard on solving Ebola. They are saving somebody else.

That impulse is broadly shared in Israel. We have all heard stories about how, in natural or man-made disasters, Israeli teams of first responders are literally the first in to the rescue. The Rwandan genocide. Haiti. Japan. The Philippines. South Sudan. Hurricane Katrina. Hurricane Sandy. Colorado floods. Arkansas tornado. There is an Israel NGO called IsraAID whose mission is to save somebody else.

That happened again this summer, literally as the war with Hamas was happening in real time. On July 14, while Hamas is firing off missiles and rockets and mortars on Israeli civilians,

a lightning strike caused the worst fire in Washington state history. A fire burned for more than 10 days destroying 300 homes, reducing them to rubble. IsraAID sent seven Israeli volunteers to sift through the rubble of destroyed homes, helping citizens sort through the shards of what had been their lives. These Israeli volunteers could not solve Hamas. But they could and did save somebody else, total strangers in Washington who were not alone as they faced their devastation.

This impulse to save somebody else indeed extends to Gaza itself. There is a Palestinian Catholic priest named Reverend Raed Abusahliah, who is the director of the Catholic humanitarian aid group called Caritas Jerusalem. In the wake of the war, Caritas Jerusalem sought humanitarian assistance for the citizens of Gaza. He expected to receive generous support from Christians and Muslims, which he did receive.

What he did *not* expect was this: half of the donors to his campaign were *Israeli Jews*. “I admit that I am somewhat surprised,” he said. One of the Israeli Jewish donors was a woman named Angy Shavit. She gave an interview to USA Today in which she shared that she has Palestinian friends in Gaza who needed diapers. So she contributed lots of diapers to Gaza babies through Caritas Jerusalem. Isn’t she helping the enemy, the reporter asked. No, she responded. “Hamas’ tunnels won’t be built with diapers.” Angy Shavit, and the other Israeli Jewish donors, cannot solve the problem of Hamas. But they try as best they can to save somebody else.

Now what do we make of this impulse? I can’t solve my own problem, problem A, so I’ll do something helpful for somebody else contending with problem B? What is this move about?

Is it a cheap publicity stunt? Israel trying to get good publicity when there is so much bad publicity?

Is it a move to change the conversation? Israel trying to focus world attention on redemptive activity rather than the fog and loss of war?

Is it an effort to create a diversion: look here, in Haiti, in Washington State, in Uganda, don't look there, in Gaza.

No doubt there may be critics who say these things. But I believe they are wrong.

I believe that what is going on here at the deepest level is that Israel is embodying something beautiful, noble and true. All of us face problems we cannot solve. And that can make us small. Angry. Shriveled. Self-focused. Brittle. But Israel's leading the cure for the Ebola virus, supporting distraught victims of a wildfire in Washington, and even helping Gaza's citizens without helping Hamas, is a defiant refusal to grow small, angry, shriveled, self-focused and brittle. Despite its own intractable problems, Israel is going to say yes to life. Yes to hope. Yes to making the world better than it was yesterday. When you cannot solve your own problem, solve somebody else's. At least you are resilient.

All of us can take a page from Israel's book and do the same when we face our own intractable problems. We learn that from the late great Robin Williams.

In 1995, actor Christopher Reeve of superman fame was paralyzed after a horsebackriding accident. How painful was this irony. Reeve was so young, so dashing, so strong, so invincible, so charismatic, that he could credibly play a man who could jump over tall buildings and save the world. There he was, the actor who played Superman, laid up in the hospital about to undergo an operation that would reattach his skull to his spine. He was told he had a 50/50 chance of survival. Just then, as he was at a low point, sad and afraid, entered an old friend, Robin Williams—they had been roommates years earlier at Julliard. Robin Williams was wearing a blue scrub, a yellow surgical gown, and speaking in a thick Russian accent. He

told Reeve that he was a proctologist and announced that he would be performing a certain kind of exam. While the particulars of that exam are not bimah-worthy—at least not on Rosh Hashanah, probably not on Shabbat either— here is what is bimah-worthy. Williams showed up. Williams cared. Williams made a sad man laugh. Williams made a lonely man know that he was not alone. This *is* bimah-worthy. That day, that visit, that moment, Robin Williams saved Christopher Reeve’s life. Reeve observed: “For the first time since the accident, I laughed. My old friend had helped me know that somehow I was going to be OK.”

That story is an old story. It has been around since 1995. But what was new in the story we only discovered this summer when Robin Williams tragically took his own life. We now know that Williams battled with severe depression. He could not solve his own intractable dilemma. But even though he could not save himself, he could and did save Christopher Reeve.

And that brings us to now. How are we going to be hopeful and realistic when reality is not always so hopeful?

Israel has this challenge. It had the problem of Hamas last year, it has it again this year, it will have it again next year. But that does not stop Israel from saving somebody else.

We have this challenge too. Most of us here can think of problems that we *had* last year, that we *have* this year, and that we *will have* again next year. Here is something we can always do, it never goes out of style, and it is why God put us here in this world: *save somebody else*.
Shanah tovah.