

A few years ago I joined a strategy session for the local immigration justice accompaniment network in Boston as one of the clergy team leaders. In that meeting there was some community building, some strategizing, and what I remember most: a presentation about prison abolition from the Massachusetts Bail Fund. What I remember most is thinking to myself, “this is not what I expected to be talking about.” I listened, understanding that our immigration bond fund had gotten a lot of support from the Mass Bail Fund. I noted that many people in the room seemed passionate about prison abolition. I decided that I didn’t need to go into my questions or concerns about this presentation in order to support the immigration work we had set out to do as a network.

In the coming months I noticed calls to abolish ICE. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, I’ve heard many, many calls to defund the police from black lives matter activists. While I am generally sympathetic to the statement “abolish ICE,” due to personal experiences in my immigration work, I felt hesitant and a little intimidated by the fullness and completeness of these calls- abolish is such an absolute word!- and I didn’t know what they meant for me as a white Jewish person, so again, I kept quiet.

Towards the end of this summer, I received an email asking for help from local clergy who had been involved in immigration accompaniment. The Mass Bail Fund was under attack and they were looking for moral voices to write letters in support of their work.

To understand what was going on, and what a moral voice might say, we need some background on bail and the role of bail funds in the historical moment that was the summer of 2020.

Bail amounts are set by judges before a person is tried for a crime. The stated goal of bail is to make sure that a person shows up for their trial. Pay money and live freely until the trial, (after which the money would be returned), or don’t pay, and stay in jail until the trial. A huge problem with this system is that disproportionately black and brown people who can’t pay are stuck in jail for an indeterminate amount of time until their trials. That jail time has many negative ramifications, including but not limited to breaking apart families, lost jobs and financial instability, and immeasurable effects on mental health.

It’s important to note that if a prosecutor is concerned that someone is truly dangerous, they can ask that no bail be set, and there is a process for keeping that person locked up pre-trial. Anyone for whom there is a bail number set is not assumed to be dangerous to the community and is considered innocent until proven guilty. When people can’t pay bail, the fact that they end up incarcerated before their trial makes them appear to be criminals before being convicted of anything. This stands in contrast to people who can pay their bail amount and are able to live freely before their trials, even if the crimes they are accused of are identical.

In the wake of the racial justice protests this summer, a lot of donations came into bail funds across the country, and they were able to bail out more people, at higher bail amount than they had previously. Remember, these people have not been convicted of anything.

Unfortunately, as happens in roughly 6.8% of cases, someone bailed out this summer by the Mass Bail Fund was charged with a new offense, and conservative forces harassed the Fund and its staff person for freeing a “criminal.”

I looked into the smear campaign, and I thought it was horrible, but I didn’t answer the call to write a letter to the editor. Part of me didn’t fully understand the issues quickly enough, and part of me was nervous about putting my name out around a tense, hot issue that was relatively new to me.

This high holiday season I am coming to understand not just the specific dynamics of the Mass Bail Fund’s situation, but what it means for me to have been quiet, not sharing my questions, not pushing myself to look into what these situations have to do with me personally.

As many of you are no doubt aware, we are in a time of movement and possibility around racial justice in our country. Black Lives Matter signs are on lawns throughout the neighborhood. I live in a mostly white and Jewish context, and more people are taking it upon themselves to study white supremacy and our roles in propagating it than I’ve ever witnessed. In other words, I see white people all around me engaging in the work of *t’shuvah*, awakening, so they can return (*t’shuvah* is literally turning) to where they want to be as citizens of this country. And yet, even knowing my communities were doing this, I didn’t work to educate myself enough to stand up for the bail fund.

Our liturgy for the high holidays speaks predominantly in the plural- “We are guilty, we have sinned.” This plural language feels particularly apt for reckoning with the significant sins of our society: *we* have contributed to climate disaster. *We* are part of social systems of oppression that hold back people based on their race, disability, nation of origin, gender, immigration status.... Most years when I read our high holiday prayers like this I feel grateful for the space to rage, mourn, feel the guilt, feel the impetus to improve together.

At the same time, I have struggled with these plural statements because I don’t really know where they leave me as an individual wrapped up in these systems. It can feel too easy to say, “for the sin we have committed against you by our explicit and implicit racism” - yes, I live in a racist society, amid systems much bigger than myself, but in the context of *teshuvah*, I can only be responsible for my own actions, which feel far insufficient to combat the hugeness of our problems.

Traditionally, concepts of *mitzvah* and transgression are divided into two categories- *bein adam l’makom* - repairing the relationship between yourself and God, *bein adam l’chaveiro* - between a person and their fellow human. Recently, I’ve heard added the category of *bein adam l’atzmo*, between a person and herself. And this summer my friend and havruta Rabbi Salem Pearce suggested that we need a new category- *bein adam l’kahal* - between a person and their collective.

When I think about my lack of engagement in the conversation about prison abolition, and lack of preparation for answering the call to support the Mass Bail Fund, I realize that while there may be reasonable motivations for my actions or inactions, those inactions lead me to fail in my responsibilities to the collective.

This dynamic of allowing myself to be unprepared and ignorant of the issues is highlighted powerfully in the radio journalist Chana Joffe-Walt's new podcast series, "Nice White Parents." (I learned after drafting this sermon that Chana is Rabbi Brian's daughter!) For the podcast, she interviewed people who advocated for school integration in the 1960s but then chose not to send their children to integrated schools. One of those parents, Elaine, described herself at the time as "innocent," and Joffe-Walt comments, "*I think what Elaine actually meant was not that she was innocent, but that she was naive. She was naive about the reality of segregation, the harm of it. And naive about what it would take to undo it.... I think she didn't want to know. When Elaine said the word innocent, I felt a jolt of recognition. I felt like Elaine had walked me right up to the truth about her, and about me.*"

Joffe-Walt's comment here hones in on the tight connection between naivete, innocence, and the ability to shirk responsibility without even noticing that this causes harm. Blessedly, many white Americans are starting to combat this dynamic by reading and learning more about what Black and Brown Americans experience in this country. This learning process is honorable and deeply important.

And, the fact that action is necessary, and not just learning, should go without saying. But we will never get to this action, meaningful t'shuvah bein adam l'kahal- between us as individuals and the larger society- if we don't focus on the ways that we preserve our "innocence"- those everyday actions that don't explicitly hurt a specific person but reinforce systems that hurt and hold back many. I believe this is true for most of us, regardless of our station in society, because we've been living within a white supremacist, xenophobic, sexist and homophobic culture, and we all are at risk of perpetuating it, whether or not we want to.

As I consider the conclusions I'm coming to, it's overwhelming. Am I really suggesting that on Yom Kippur when we are already so sensitive to where we've missed the mark explicitly, we need to spend more energy considering the parts of our lives that we thought were more or less ok? Is there any hope for us as a society if even the things we genuinely believe are decent, everyday aspects of ourselves need to change?

One option at this point is to balk at the enormity of the task.

Another option is to step back, and reconnect with the dream of the world we want to live in. In Jewish language- *olam ha'ba*, the world to come. It turns out, starting with the vision for the society we wish we lived in is exactly how the prison abolitionism presentation had started in that training for our immigration justice network. They stay grounded in this philosophy, writing on their website:

We share ... abolitionist vision of a future where communities have the resources to address harm when it happens and seek community accountability. People need healthcare, healing and trauma services, employment and economic opportunity, education, and housing. We will continue to post bail as we are able, ensuring that freedom is not just for the wealthy and that presumption of innocence is preserved. We will continue to work with people's families and communities so people can be as prepared for release as possible. We will continue to work toward abolishing pretrial detention alongside fellow abolitionists who are leading community organizing to end cycles of harm and poverty and create processes for healing and well-being.

Since I realized I missed the moment to support the Mass Bail Fund when they needed my voice, as part of my *teshuvah* I started learning more about the abolitionist visioning so I could better situate myself if a similar call were to come again - because I believe it will.

There is much to say and read about the current abolitionism movement. It's much bigger than I originally realized, and not everyone agrees on exactly the same things - just like when people talk about, say, Judaism.

As I was reading and talking to people, I noticed the energy that was drawing me in so clearly: this project of reimagining society is a powerful act of love for our communities. One place this is happening is the Movement for Black Lives Legislative platform, known as the Breathe Act. As I looked at the website for the Breathe Act, indeed I felt myself breathe more deeply. It is a deep and broad act of love to imagine and write out the policies that we can work on to make lives better for all Americans, centering the experiences of Black Americans, in direct opposition to the ways they have been systematically marginalized. This process opens greater possibilities for people of all backgrounds. Though I haven't read every detail of the platform, and though I don't believe I have to love every detail, the fullness of its creators' commitment to bettering the lives of the people around them is palpable. To get a taste of that vision, you can read the Breathe Act's introductory words which are included as part of our alternative readings in our machzor.

I realized that, grounded in our current harsh and painful realities, I had in many ways lost the ability to imagine a more redeemed world. Without vision, it is very hard to stay motivated and engaged in the work of *tikkun olam*. Encountering other people's powerful, detailed visions of equitable, healthy and peaceful communities and joining a movement to fight for it, energizes, teaches and motivates me.

This Yom Kippur, I invite us all to practice visioning.

What does the world you wish to live in look like?

And then, what is just one step, however small, that you can take that will move you, and all of us slightly closer?

As our bodies are empty of food so we can fill our spirits, let this be our work this Yom Kippur. Let us each clarify our vision so we can move together, closer to that beautiful world.