

Yom Kippur 5767  
Rabbi Andrea London  
Spiritual Bypass

When the idea surfaced last year to take our teens to the Gulf Coast to help in the post-hurricane reconstruction efforts, there were some who questioned the value and the cost of a trip like this. Wouldn't it be better to send money and have professionals do the work? It was a valid question. After all, we didn't have much, if any, construction experience. Yet, the trip went ahead—in truth, support from the congregation was overwhelming—and once we started the work our reason for being there became clear: the trip was an opportunity not just to build a new ceiling or paint a wall but to rebuild weakened souls.

On our second day in Moss Point, MS, I met Lashonda, the secretary of the Shiloh Baptist Church. Lashonda was our local coordinator. The thirty teens and chaperones on the trip were just about to sit down for lunch when I approached her. “You're the rabbi?” she said to me with a mixture of interest and incredulity. In my sweat pants, t-shirt and baseball cap I didn't look very rabbinic. She was animated and excited to engage me in conversation. “I wish you had been here yesterday to hear the sermon from our guest preacher. It was so inspirational, rabbi. She was telling us that when your spirits are low and your heart is heavy, you need a spiritual bypass. Just because your heart may not be full of joy doesn't mean you should give up. You have to find reasons to praise the Lord and it will make your heart strong again.”

A spiritual bypass... what a powerful image. In a community severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina and still very much in the process of rebuilding six months later, you can imagine that spirits must have been weakened along with property. Yet, the people we met inspired us with their hope and their ability to see the blessings amidst the destruction. One woman told us, “If the hurricane hadn't come, we would never have met you.” A group of woman decked out in their Sunday best who we met at a restaurant said to our sweaty and dirty crew, “Bless you for coming here to help us.”

Another comment we heard was, “Before the hurricane, I had lots of shoes, now I have just this one pair from Wal-Mart and it's all I need.” After hearing this, one of our teens said, “Before we came down here, all I wanted to do with the rest of my spring break was to go to the mall. Now that seems like such a silly thing to do.” It is amazing what kind of perspective we can get about our lives when we meet people who seem to feel immense gratitude for the little that they have.

The physical labor on our trip was hard and, sometimes, uncomfortable. When I arrived in the Gulf Coast, several days after the rest of the group, I went straight to a house that a Beth Emet crew was working on. They had spent the morning removing moldy insulation. It was hot and muggy, yet they were clothed in long sleeves and pants and wore face masks to try and keep the itchy fiberglass fibers off their body and out of their mouths. Despite the discomfort, they were working hard, pulling insulation down from the ceiling and sweeping up the black, ugly mess. When we left to return home, the

group had completed painting one house and installed new insulation and two new ceilings in another; but so much work was left undone. The real success of the trip was not just in how much physical work was accomplished but in the spiritual renewal the participants experienced.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said that when he marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, he felt like his feet were praying. Our feet, legs, hands, arms and backs prayed a lot while we were on the Gulf Coast. An old Zionist song muses *Banu artza livnot u'l'hibanot* – We came to build and to be rebuilt. The early Zionists saw the building of the State of Israel as having spiritual dimensions—to rebuild Jews spiritually by bringing them back to work the land. This was our experience. Our hard physical labor in the Gulf Coast had many spiritual affects. Those we met were heartened that a group from Chicago would travel all that way to help them rebuild their homes, and our spirits were uplifted by their kindness, resilience, and positive attitudes. The Beth Emet teens were astounded by the ability of the people we met to find joy and meaning amid such difficult circumstances. This would never have happened if we had stayed home in Evanston. Moreover, those who participated in the trip were energized by the experience and sought additional ways to help. *Mitzvah goreret Mitzvah*,<sup>1</sup> says Pirkei Avot. The power of doing one mitzvah is that it compels you to do another. The power of the trip was not just in the six days we spent in the Gulf Coast but in the relationships we built with each other and with the people we met, and a renewed zeal to engage in acts of Tikkun Olam.

The Kabbalistic concept of Tikkun Olam—repair of the world— understands the inseparable connection between physical acts and spiritual renewal. Tikkun Olam is the gathering of the holy sparks that were scattered in the universe after the world was created. (The Kabbalistic story of creation imagines a cosmic “Big Bang” in which God who was everything in the universe, contracts to make room for the rest of creation. God filled vessels with spiritual energy, but they were too fragile to contain the holiness with which they were filled so they shattered and sparks were scattered everywhere.) Each mitzvah performed causes one of these sparks to return to its source, increasing the holiness in our world one spark at a time. Every mitzvah we do has the power to repair not only the physical world, but the cosmic realm as well.

On Yom Kippur we deny our bodies—the physical realm—to focus on our souls. Tomorrow when we return to the world in which the physical and spiritual are inextricably linked, our prayer is that we will be renewed for a year of physical vigor and spiritual vitality. Yom Kippur is our annual spiritual bypass—an opportunity to contemplate where our hearts are blocked and how we can bring a fresh supply of renewed spirit to our lives. In bypass surgery veins from a healthy part of the body are used to overcome a blockage in a less healthy part. At Beth Emet our commitment to social action is a vigorous and strong part of our communal body that can supply renewed vitality to our spirits. As we experienced on our trip to the Gulf Coast, this work has the power to open the blocked passages of cynicism, despair, and resignation that keep our souls from functioning optimally.

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<sup>1</sup> Pirkei Avot, 4:2.

Let me give you some other examples of this at work at Beth Emet:

The Beth Emet soup kitchen has been going strong for almost four years now. The real strength of our soup kitchen is that it is not just concerned with the physical sustenance of our guests but with their emotional needs as well. Music is played at every meal, and guests are treated with warmth, dignity, and respect.

By now most of you are familiar with the fundraising that Beth Emet did to support the relief efforts of our sister community in Israel, Tzur Hadassah. As missiles rained down on Northern Israel, many took shelter in places further south. Tzur Hadassah responded quickly, opening their homes and hearts to those who fled, but Tzur Hadassah is a small congregation, itself housed in a trailer, without the financial resources to support a major relief effort. So Tzur Hadassah looked to us, and the Beth Emet community responded with incredible speed and generosity. Even the youth of Beth Emet joined the effort, committing to raise money to buy a projector and screen for their sister community. These items were used as soon as they arrived, providing much needed relief and entertainment during a very difficult and tense time. After the Lebanon war ended, Rabbi Ofer Sabath Beit-Halachmi told me that Tzur Hadassah was overwhelmed and buoyed by our generous and quick response. Knowing that they had our support provided them not only with the financial resources they needed to support their relief efforts; it also gave them a spiritual lift to know that they were not alone.

Despite these and many other wonderful efforts by the Beth Emet community, we know Tikkun Olam is an ongoing task. Rabbi Tarfon used to say, “The day is short; there is much work [to be done]; [yet,] the laborers are lazy, [even though] the wages are great and the Householder is insistent.”<sup>2</sup> Our lives are short in comparison to the work that needs to be done – the work is immense. God, Rabbi Tarfon’s “Householder” demands much from us, and we can be less than diligent about the important tasks. But the rewards are great if we allow this work to strengthen our hearts and refresh the spirits of those with whom we work.

Our experience in the Gulf Coast was overwhelmingly positive, but it was not without frustration. The destruction was immense and our contribution felt tiny in comparison with the damage we saw everywhere around us. As we drove around these communities we saw concrete slabs where houses used to be, sides of homes completely ripped off, and debris scattered everywhere as if the hurricane had just hit the week before, not six months earlier.

Elliot Leffler, our former youth director who organized the Gulf Coast trip kept reminding the group of the wise dictum from Pirkei Avot <sup>3</sup> *Lo Alecha Hamlacha ligmor, v’lo ata ben horin l’hibateil mimena* – It is not up to us to finish the work, but neither are we free to desist from it. Rabbis living close to 1,800 years ago understood the frustration we were experiencing, the immensity of the work and the paucity of financial and human resources to complete the job.

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<sup>2</sup>Pirkei Avot 2:15.

<sup>3</sup> Pirke Avot 2:16.

So, spiritually revived by our time in the Gulf Coast, yet desirous of continuing to give, to aid, to assist, and to engage in Tikkun Olam, what else is there to do, but to resume the work? This December we are returning to the South. This time adults and children ages 14 and over are invited to join us on what we have dubbed “Project Livnot”. We certainly don’t expect to complete all the work that needs to be done, but we will continue to rebuild (*livnot*) in the communities of Pascagoula and Moss Point, MS and to build (*livnot*) on the relationships that we began to develop last spring. I believe this trip will be an opportunity for spiritual renewal as well. We will arrive on Christmas eve, spend Christmas day at the Shiloh Baptist Church, and volunteer in a soup kitchen. During the rest of the week, we will work rebuilding homes in the area, then celebrate Shabbat with the Reform Jewish community of Mobile, AL, who hosted our teens last spring. For Project Livnot to be a success, I need 40 people to join me. We’re leaving on December 24. Please join us. Information and registration can be found on the Beth Emet website.

For those of you who cannot make the trip, there are many opportunities to rebuild and be rebuilt here at home. Last year a diverse group of Beth Emet members met to consider where we should direct our social action activities. We developed a theme entitled, “Good Neighbors” as a focus for our social action efforts. We have decided to partner with several social service organizations in Evanston, one of them being Connections for the Homeless. We plan to work with the transitional housing program that provides housing for single mothers and their children and helps them transition out of homelessness. Beginning in January, Beth Emet will host monthly workshops for the families in this program. Topics for the workshops will include personal medical care, education, family counseling, nutrition, and how to conduct a job search. Jeff Forgash, who is coordinating this program for Beth Emet, needs volunteers with expertise in these areas to conduct the workshops. We also need volunteers to provide tutoring, childcare, and transportation. If you have ideas for workshops or are willing to volunteer in any way, please contact Jeff. More information about this program is forthcoming in the bulletin. Rambam taught that the highest level of tzedakah is helping another human being rehabilitate himself or herself.<sup>4</sup> Our work with Connections for the Homeless will give us the opportunity to engage in this loftiest form of tzedakah.

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<sup>4</sup>Rambam's Ladder of Tzedakah

1. *The person who gives reluctantly and with regret.*
2. *The person who gives graciously, but less than one should.*
3. *The person who gives what one should, but only after being asked.*
4. *The person who gives before being asked.*
5. *The person who gives without knowing to whom one gives, although the recipient knows the identity of the donor.*
6. *The person who gives without making his/her identity known.*

On Yom Kippur we are starkly confronted with the admonition from Pirke Avot, “The day is short; there is much work [to be done]; [yet,] the laborers are lazy, [even though] the wages are great and the Householder is insistent.” Today we are confronted with our mortality and the fleeting nature of our days. Yom Kippur is our annual spiritual bypass, a chance to clear out the corrosive behaviors that clog our lives and prevent us from living to the fullest the days allotted to us.

As the introduction to the Unetaneh Tokef prayer reminds us, “what we have chosen to become stands in judgment over what we may yet hope to be.”<sup>5</sup> Today we work to unblock the pathways that prevent us from embracing our true potential to contribute to Tikkun Olam, the physical and spiritual healing of the world. As we restore ourselves to spiritual health and vitality, we contemplate how we can make a difference in the coming year and how we want God to judge us next Yom Kippur. May God be pleased with the diligence of our labors, may our spirits be renewed, and may hope and faith flow freely through our world.

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7. *The person who gives without knowing to whom he/she gives. The recipient does not know from whom he/she receives.*
  8. *The person who helps another to support himself/herself by a gift or a loan or by finding employment for that person, thus helping that person to become self-sufficient.*

<sup>5</sup> Gates of Repentance, p. 176.