

Am I My Brother's Keeper?

Too many words. Too many words already in the machzor. Many more to go.

The greatest wordsmith in the English language, William Shakespeare, speaks to our hearts (from a passage in Macbeth, after a character learns that his entire household has been brutally murdered):

Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erfraught heart and
Bids it break.

I am full of sorrow and my heart is breaking.

The past week we grieved Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and we were enraged by the injustice to Breonna Taylor. This summer we honored the breath-taking life of John Lewis, and we were horrified to watch a police officer taking the life breath from George Floyd. Our distress led to protest and innocent arrests and so many more were laid to rest, while leaders misled about the virus's dead and failed instead to staunch its spread.

Numbers paint a stark picture of the crisis we face in our country today.

203,000 Americans dead of the coronavirus in just six months. Black people are dying at twice the rate of white people.

41 million Americans facing hunger. Nearly 13 million are children.

Over 1 million acres burned in Oregon and 3 million acres devastated in California in the worst wildfire season in history.

This summer in Death Valley, temperatures reached a record 130 degrees Fahrenheit. In Siberia, above the Arctic Circle, temperatures reached 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit.

Stop. You might say. The devastation is unceasing. The sorrow is relentless. Stop the words. Give us new words. Words of comfort.

In Psalm 27 the poet cries out:

Do not spurn or abandon me, God of deliverance. Do not give me over to my enemy.

The Eternal is my light and deliverance, whom shall I fear? The Eternal is my living source of strength, before whom shall I tremble? Should a force encamp against me, my heart shall have no fear; should a war arise against me, in one thing I shall trust. Truly in a day of trouble, I am nestled in God's shelter, hidden in the recess of God's tent.

But I am not satisfied with words of comfort alone. 36 days before the election that will determine the very moral underpinnings of this country, in this time when each of us is called to give everything we have, we need more than comfort. On Rosh Hashanah, I asked you to contemplate 2 essential questions: Who am I? Where am I? I pray that you have girded yourself with your own answers, because I now have a third:

Hashomer achi anochi? Am I my brother's keeper?

The entire Hebrew Bible was written to answer to that question.

Yes. You are. You are your brother's keeper. You are responsible for one another.

Abraham says yes when he argues with God, insisting that God commit to justice. Abraham demands that God refrain from annihilating the cruel city of Sodom if there are but ten innocents in the city. Abraham loses the argument. There are not even ten good people there. But he keeps his integrity and launches a moral revolution followed by millions today.

Moses says yes, when he instructs us not to oppress the stranger, and to care for the poor, the orphan and the widow. Moses does not reach the Promised Land. But he leaves a legacy of social responsibility that we teach fervently *midor ledor*, from generation to generation.

Isaiah says yes, when he charges us “to unlock the shackles of wickedness, and loosen the bonds of the yoke, to set the downtrodden free, and to break every yoke!” Isaiah himself does not live to join his people in returning from exile in Babylon. But his shofar call resounds on Yom Kippur in every Jewish holy space year after year.

Hashomer achi anochi. Am I my brother's keeper?

What kind of question is this? It's hardly an innocent query or probing interrogation. Cain is standing by the corpse of his own brother, Abel, who has died at Cain's own hand. Just as God had asked Adam—*ayeka?* Where are you, knowing full well where Adam was hiding; now, God asks Cain a question, *ai hevel achicha*, Where is your brother Abel? God has witnessed what Cain has done, testing the son as God had tested the father. And just like Adam, Cain avoids responsibility. He responds to God's query with a lie, I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper? Adam was not prepared to answer a question honestly. Cain is not yet ready to ask a question sincerely. From that point on, Jewish tradition sanctifies the act of questioning, as a process for learning truth and deepening understanding.

What does it mean to be my brother's keeper? What is a shomer?

When I “keep” someone, do I own them, holding them tight, making decisions on their behalf?

Do I have all the answers?

Or is it possible to hold someone close without suffocating them?

No, shomer doesn't mean “own.” It means guard, protect, be watchful. Adam is placed in the Garden *L'ovda ul'shomra* (Gen. 2:15) to tend and nurture it. We are instructed, *V'shamru vnei Yisrael et hashabbat* (Ex.31:16)—to protect Shabbat, to preserve it.

To protect and to preserve. To respond when someone calls, to listen when someone speaks. To hear Abel's blood crying from the ground. We read in tomorrow afternoon's Torah portion: *Lo ta'amod al dam reyecha*. Do not stand idly by the blood of another. (Lev. 19:16) To be a *Shomer*

is to do justice. To refuse to walk away. To stand up. To speak out. To offer a hand. To feel another's suffering. To be an ally. *Shomer*—do *tzedek*, justice, and do it justly.

Who is *achi*? First, my brother. And then my kindred. And finally, all of humanity. We also read in the Torah tomorrow afternoon: *Lo tisna et achicha bi'lvavecha*. You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart. (Lev. 19:17) In today's global pandemic, we are even more keenly aware of how inseparable and indispensable everyone is on this scorched planet. To know someone as a brother is first and foremost to see them as a full human being; made, like me, *betzelem Elohim*, in the image of the divine, no greater or no less than me. To love our neighbors as we love ourselves. To greet each person without judgment, and to encounter them with *chesed*, kindness. And to welcome *chesed* from them in return. Because if I am my brother's keeper, then they are also my guardian and protector.

Finally, the word *anochi*, I. This is the hardest part: We need to guard one another with our *anochi*, with our whole selves, with the most vulnerable part of my being, the "I" that is surrounded by a wall of defensiveness. "I" guard my brother best when I get out of my own way. This is a practice we call *anavah*, humility: to know how much space to take up, and when. To recognize when our knee is on someone's neck. And to discern when it's our place to step up, to speak out, to bring our whole selves to another, and not just that part that is afraid.

Cain's *anochi* was too big to make room for anyone else. While we do not know what he said to his brother directly, we know that he could only see Abel as a threat. And that "I"-ness that arises out of fear can be the most dangerous, especially when the "I" holds a weapon. Because emotion turns to action in the blink of an eye. Why don't we know what occurred between Cain and Abel? Because it happened so fast.

But we know that in the aftermath, God wails like a grieving parent: What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Cain wants to escape responsibility, but God knows, and we know, that he cannot. He is accountable for his actions.

On Yom Kippur, we know that we too are accountable for our actions. We fast, we dress in white. We confess, *ashamnu, bagadnu*... we have sinned, we have betrayed. We force ourselves to admit something so simple, yet so hard: I am not perfect. We must let go of our rosy image of ourselves. We must face our deeds and bear witness to the impact our lives have on others. And then we are capable of beginning to do *teshuva*, repentance.

Today is a day to remember, to remember where we have not acted for justice, to remember when we have failed to encounter another with love, to remember that I am my brother's keeper, with humility. I am accountable.

I turn back to Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who broke so many barriers in her lifetime in the pursuit of justice. On Friday she became the first woman and the first Jew to lie in State in the U.S. Capitol. Yet her impressive legacy is in jeopardy. Justice Ginsburg enters the pantheon of great Jewish

teachers, from Abraham to Moses to Isaiah to Ruth, urging us to act regardless of whether we live to see the fruits of our labors. Her rabbi, Lauren Holtzblatt, spoke about the justice's commitment to writing dissents. **“Dissenters hope that they are written not for today but for tomorrow. Justice Ginsburg’s dissents were not cries of defeat. They were blueprints for the future.”**

This is how we build a world of justice and love. We build it for the future. We must preserve it and protect it justly. We must work together as a beloved community despite distance, lovingly. We must step out of ourselves in order to make room for something greater, something that seems far away at this moment, humbly. We must build continually, relentlessly. I pray that we all have the wherewithal to keep on fighting for that world and for our future.

Enough words. For now, let's just sing. *Olam chesed yibaneh.*

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