

We're all in the same boat
Yom Kippur, 2010/5771
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A story is told of a kingdom called "Paradise." "Paradise" not because it was more beautiful or wealthier than any other kingdom; but because it was a place where if one person needed help, there was always someone to lend a hand. All of this was due to a wise king who knew that his subjects would treat one another the way he treated them. And so, he was always available, willing to lend a compassionate ear and to give generously from his royal resources.

Eventually the king grew old and his son the Prince assumed the throne in his stead. One day royal ministers appeared in the new court.

"You majesty, there is a terrible famine in the western regions of your kingdom. People are beginning to starve. We must do something."

The Prince looked at the ministers and then at the plentiful bowls of food around the throne room. "There is a famine," he asked?

"Yes," they replied.

"And yet," said the Prince, "I seem to have plenty of food." He thought for a moment and then responded, "It's not my problem."

The stunned ministers had no idea what to say and simply left the Prince's presence.

This pattern repeated itself time after time: The royal ministers would present a problem facing the people and the prince, looking upon his own wealth and resources would reply, "It's not my problem."

Of course, the Prince's attitude began to affect the citizens of the kingdom and "Paradise" soon turned into something else. Where once they had readily come to the aid of a neighbor or stranger, now they simply shook their head, "You're having a problem?" they would say. "Well it's not my problem."

Only the Fisherman, it seemed, was distressed by this turn of events. He wondered what he could do to restore the kingdom of old. Finally he had an idea. He invited the Prince and his court for a boat ride, to enjoy a day out on the beautiful lake that was cherished by all the citizens of the kingdom. The Prince was delighted by the invitation and readily accepted.

On a beautiful day the Prince and his court boarded the boat and set off for a wonderful day of sailing. They enjoyed the scenery while feasting on a tasty meal.

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As the day began to wane, the wind picked up and waves rocked the boat. A court official came to the Fisherman and asked that they return to shore.

“Of course,” the Fisherman replied. “I just have one more thing I need to do.”

With that he opened his tool box, took out a drill, walked to the center of the boat and began drilling a hole into the bottom of the boat.

“What are you doing?” the surprised official asked. “If you drill a hole the boat will fill with water and we will all drown.”

“It’s my boat,” the Fisherman replied, “and if I want to drill a hole then I will.”

Quickly the officer went to find his royal highness. The Prince was not about to let the Fisherman’s silliness ruin his wonderful day.

“Fisherman,” asked the Prince, “why are you drilling a hole in the boat?”

“It’s my boat,” the Fisherman replied, “and if I want to drill a hole then I will.”

Becoming agitated the Prince now commanded, “Fisherman, I command you to stop drilling.”

“It’s my boat,” the Fisherman calmly replied as he continued to drill.

The Prince began to lose his composure. He asked nervously, “Fisherman, what gives you the right to do this?”

“It’s my boat,” the Fisherman said again, “and if I want to drill a hole then I will.”

“Please,” the Prince now begged. “I don’t want to drown.”

Finally the Fisherman stopped drilling and looked up, “You don’t want to drown? Well, it’s not my problem.”

“What do you mean it’s not your problem?” cried the Prince. “Everyone can see that my problem is your problem. We all can see that this is all of our problem. After all we are all in the same boat.”

“We’re all in the same boat?” the fisherman asked, looking with knowing eyes at the Prince.

Then like a man who had just figured out a great riddle the prince repeated. “We’re all on the same boat.”

Shaking his head in agreement the Fisherman responded, “Now we can go home.”

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Returning to his castle the Prince never forgot the lesson he learned that day. He spent the rest of his reign supporting the people of his realm. They, in turn, followed his example. Once again the kingdom was Paradise.

Building paradise is a collective effort. We entered the sanctuary today as individuals, each focused on the direction of our personal lives. We might be tempted to protest as we recite the litany of confessions, "I did no such thing ... This is not my problem!" But a loud and constant voice reminds us at every turn of the page, "Your problem is my problem." "It is all of our problem." Over and over again we hear the words of our prayers, *al cheyt shechatanu*, "for the ways in which we have missed the mark," *avinu malkeynu* "our parent, our ruler." We hear the Torah call out *atem nitzvavem, kulchem lifnai Adonai Eloheichem*, "you, all of you stand before Adonai your God," and *atem kedoshim*, "you, all of you, shall be holy because I, Adonai [all of] your (in the plural) God am holy. We are all in the same boat.

This is a central message on this day, and its implications for our journey as community is wide ranging. Taken to heart it effects our understanding of / and relationship to those around us. Allow me to share two examples today of the ways I am affected by the message of this day: one that causes me great concern and another that equally fills me with hope.

First, even as we try to embrace the 'us' that we hear over and over again in our reflections on this day, I am increasingly distressed by angry "get out of my boat" finger pointing that is becoming so prevalent in our conversations. There is a coarseness, a lack of civility, and divisiveness that is spreading out like an infection. Whether it is in the realm of political debate or public policy, or is focused on religious, racial or social identities, there is too much intolerance. Arguments against a particular political, religious or social issue are too often not advanced through an objective review of the facts but rather, couched in hateful personal accusations and horrific stereotypes. This may be great for ratings, but like the uncaring Prince, the effect on us is anything but great. At this very difficult time, we need to work together, to support each other, reach out to each other, acknowledge, even about those with whom we disagree, that we are all in the same boat. Instead there is a constant and frankly shocking refrain that any attempt to do so will be punished. The message is, "If you are thinking of extending your hands, it better be to push them off!" What is that? How can we advance the common good if this is our response to those with whom we disagree? What was it Mr. Lincoln said, "A house divided cannot stand?" We, who have been thrown off the boat so many times in our own history, should be especially sensitive to these words and concerned about these suggestions. Because when they start lining people up to throw them off, we won't be at the back of the line. We should all take a lesson from Jonah's fellow travelers, who, even knowing that he was responsible for the storm that threatened their lives, still hesitated to throw him from the boat. We simply have to be better and must do better than this.

I know you won't be surprised, when I tell you that our tradition anticipates all of this and teaches us how we must face those with whom we disagree. Judaism is certainly no stranger to disagreement. We all know: "Two Jews, three opinions." So, how many do we have in here tonight? Where there is community, there is bound to be disagreement and debate. But if we are, ultimately, to remain united, if we are to maintain the dream of a Promised Land, we must handle our disagreements in an appropriate way. And so, among the many instructions on creating a holy community that we read tomorrow/this afternoon we find this directive regarding *tochehah* that is, the rules for admonishing, rebuking your neighbor : *Lo tisna et acheecha hochayach tochee-ach et amee-teh-chah* That is, "You must not hate your brother that you might rebuke him." "Not hate him so that you might rebuke him?" What is the meaning of this rather strange verse? R' Yehudah Leib of Polonnoye teaches that it means, "One who wishes to rebuke another must first examine whether he holds any personal grudge against [him]. Only if you are sure that you do not hate your brother in your heart are you permitted to rebuke [him]. Similarly, the *Avnei Azel*, instructs, "... The explanation is that one can only truly rebuke a person that one loves ... One should not rebuke someone he hates, because such an action has no effect. ..." Or in language we have all used, "Just because I'm angry at you doesn't mean I don't love you." Appropriate, constructive criticism has to come from the right place; beginning with a sense that we are all, ultimately, in the same boat.

Which brings me, finally, to that place where I find an equal measure of hope: not surprisingly it is right here, in our little rowboat: Temple Ahavat Shalom. I think, on a micro level we are able to do something that should serve as an example to all those beyond our little pond. There is certainly a wide variety of opinion among us regarding a wide range of issues, and yet, we are able, for the most part, to 'rebuke' one another in a loving, caring and tolerant way. Those differences in opinion are important, frankly, because they help keep us centered and on a steady, progressive course. (that's progressive with a small 'p') Through so many activities ranging from Men's club and Sisterhood, to Shabbat worship to all kinds of social activities through which we share our lives we have created an overriding sense of community and commonality that allows us to extend supportive and loving hands to each other – even when we do disagree. And that common sense of purpose, of sharing this voyage together, allows this community to also reach beyond our gates and offer loving and compassionate support to those who need us in so many ways in these difficult times. Allow me to share just a bit of what we have accomplished in this particular area since last year when I first announced a broad range of social justice initiatives that we were taking on. In addition to our continuing support of SOVA, we took first steps in offering support to the needy in our local community through our work with L.A. Family Housing, M.E.N.D. In fact, in recent days we have just wrapped up two initiatives one in support of M.E.N.D. (collecting baby clothes) and secondly of SOVA, (collecting children's books). And of course, today, like every year, we will donate tons of food from your pantry shelves to fill those at SOVA. Last year at this time I introduced you to Imagine L.A., an organization dedicated to

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eliminating homelessness for 8000 Los Angeles families by pairing them with 8000 faith based organizations in the community. I asked for someone to step forward and lead that effort. Well, no sooner had our services concluded than Marion Milman and Annette Held stood up and volunteered. And now I am delighted to report that last year's hope has become this year's reality as Annette reported just this afternoon that we are in the final stages of being matched with a family. I am sure that there will be more information to share very soon.

Globally our work with Jewish World Watch and our own homegrown K.N.O.C.K. Foundation under the co-leadership of TAS Alum Kim Krowne has extended the loving support and resources of this community to Africa, to orphan children and women and families living in conditions that we can't even begin to imagine.

Last year we took first tentative steps. This year, we will continue to deepen and broaden our work, including a new initiative in partnership with the Jewish Fund for Justice and the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement taking a handful of post-b'nai mitzvah 8th grade students and their families in the spring to New Orleans to participate in the continuing efforts to rebuild that city. In just a few moments, you will hear more from a member of our social action committee about these social action and social justice initiatives, but for now I appeal to each of you. We need each of you to stretch out your hands in affirmation of our commonality that we might lift up even more of those who are so in need of our support. We are only able to do what we do, if, regardless of our differences, we realize that ultimately we are all in the same boat that "your problem is my problem" and "their" problem is "our" problem.

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel one of the 20th century's giants of social justice, taught, "We must continue to remind ourselves that in a free society all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty, all are responsible"

Ultimately that is the message of this day, Ultimately that is the core message of our tradition every day: we are all responsible. Your problem is indeed my problem ... their problem is our problem ... we are all in the same boat. So, let's reach out our hands and create a Paradise together.