

Yom Kippur Morning 5770  
September 28, 2009

## **“Don’t Look the Other Way”**

### Connecting Homeless with Isaiah Chapters 57-58

*By Pearl Wolfe*

In Biblical times the shofar was blown to announce an important event, such as the alarm of war or the coming of peace. The shofar is said to have been sounded during a pivotal point in Jewish history, the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses at Mount Sinai.

Today, I sound the alarm:

#### ***tekiah***

I blow the shofar today

for the more than 1,700 school children, grades K-12, who were homeless in Lane County at sometime during the year.

#### ***shvarim***

I blow the shofar

for the nearly 2,700 Lane County residents who are homeless on any given night.

#### ***teruah***

I blow the shofar

for half of those people who were chronically homeless.

#### ***tekiah gedolah***

*I blow the shofar for nearly 12,000 homeless people who sought help from a local non-profit last year.*

These compelling numbers are the awakening that Rabbi Yitz talked about in his Erev Rosh Hashanah address to our congregation. Blow the shofar to wake up the people from the routine of their daily lives. Wake up!

Listen again to the detailed, staccato sounds of the shofar blasts!

1,792 homeless students

2,684 homeless people counted on one night in January

Half of the people counted were chronically homeless

*11,784 homeless people last year sought assistance*

Now that you're awake, what now?

If these numbers surprise or compel you, let's look at the haftarah and see how we can apply Jewish ethics to moral action.

The Prophet Isaiah wondered if our acts of praying, repenting and fasting show our authentic selves to Hashem or do we present ourselves with a few contradictions. There is a great deal of sitting, standing and praying during these days at services. Does your mind ever wander during these High Holy Day services to the mundane, the daily materialistic matters connected to your home and work - all those undone items on your to do lists, unanswered emails and phone calls?

Or do you find that something that strikes a chord for you during the prayers or in between the prayers while reading some of the powerful meditations in our machzor. Do you ask yourself sincerely: What can I do differently to be a better person? Should I be paying more attention to what's important in my life: my husband, my wife, my partner, my friends, my neighbors? Why didn't I respond to that woman on the street asking for help? How do we repent on this holy day and all the treasured days of the year? The Prophet Isaiah gives us some direction. He says:

"Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice be heard on high...

Is not this the fast I have chosen?

It is to share your bread with the hungry,  
and to take the poor into your home;  
when you see the naked, to clothe them  
and not to ignore your own kin.

These verses from today's haftarah connect the teaching of Yom Kippur about *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*.

*Teshuvah* is about repentance, our relationship with ourselves. Repentance is about us changing the direction of our lives and turning towards what we know is important: torah, our traditions, our People, our family and our community. I appreciated Rabbi Maurice's definition of *teshuvah* in the TBI newsletter. He said: *teshuvah* is the work of personal moral transformation that is the essence of the high holy days.

*Tefillah* is about prayer and meditation: it speaks to our relationship with Hashem. *Tzedakah* (charity) teaches us about our relationship with other people.

Share your food, clothing and shelter with your poor brothers and sisters. Do not ignore them.

How do we weave the deepest of Jewish ethics and morality of Yom Kippur into understanding one of our community's most pressing social issues, homelessness?

In academic life, we called this applying theory to practice. In a religious context, we put into operation Jewish ethics. Our ethics become a call for action. For those who feel their Jewish identity is more cultural in terms of formal observance and ritual practice and for those who follow the rituals and observances more closely in your daily lives, how do all of us transform today's prayers and reflections into tomorrow's action?

I, along with numerous activists who are members of our congregation, share a deep heart felt connection to the young school age children, the wandering youth on the streets, the lone single adults and struggling families who are homeless in our community. I think that we all carry our Jewishness (however we practice it) into our work on homelessness and it informs how I will speak to you today.

By applying Judaism's teachings to a social problem, perhaps we can move our thinking forward. We can apply the power and sacredness of this holiest of days to transforming ourselves. We can begin by looking more closely at how we think, feel and personally interact with our most vulnerable neighbors. Let's explore the ways we can do mitzvot to repair the world by applying Prophet Isaiah words: feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless.

We ended slavery. How do we end homelessness?

**Do not look the other way. We must not look the other way.** We must not avert our eyes from people who are homeless on the streets. Each and every person begging for help on the street, sleeping under a bridge, living secretly in an abandoned building, camped and hidden away in the bushes of Amazon Park or Skinner Butte, sleeping in their car or doubled up in someone's home, each one of them has a compelling story. No one is born aspiring to homelessness

Who teaches us how to do mitzvot to make our community more humane to those that are struggling to survive? Who do we learn from? Is it our parents or our teachers or our friends? Perhaps it's from our children? Who are the heroes and heroines of our lives? Who teaches us how to commit acts of compassion, kindness and generosity to our own kin and to strangers?

I learned a great lesson from a family member, my daughter, Rachel, when she was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade at Roosevelt Middle School. I thought I knew something about homelessness since I was working at Looking Glass' homeless youth program at the time. Daily I was in contact with youth and young adults who often had been homeless for a year or more by the time I met them at New Roads. I thought this experience gave me a clear window into the issue and how best to meet the needs of young people that lack a secure and safe place to call home. One evening, Rachel, along with my husband, Bill and I were walking through downtown Eugene to eat at a local restaurant when we passed someone asking for money. I said no to him and that

I was sorry and kept walking. Rachel turned to us and asked "Why don't we give him money? He looks like he needs it." I explained that we donated to an organization locally that helped homeless families. We thought that was a better way to help someone than by simply handing them money. Rachel, then 12 years old, said that she disagreed.

Rachel often, to my chagrin, would gather to socialize with her skate boarder friends after school at Amazon Park. She said that while hanging out, she sometimes met homeless people camped in the bushes near the skate bowl. I felt my heart drop to my stomach just then. Rachel said that on more than one occasion, she would go home (we live about three blocks from the park), make sandwiches and bring them back to the park to the people camped out there who were hungry. Rachel would talk with them. They would eat the sandwiches and thanked her. She said that she felt that she could do something for them and that was how she could help.

I, at first, felt frightened for her. I had staff at my program, trained street outreach workers, who brought snacks, hygiene items and referrals to youth on the streets. We discouraged our outreach workers from going to unsafe locations like alleys and park areas that weren't in full view. Here was my 12 year old daughter doing street outreach in the parks.

I tell you this story because my daughter taught me something that day. She taught me that you act and give from your heart. You take risks. You show your humanness. You give charity, in your own way. I shared this story with Rachel to check my accuracy since she feels that sometimes I tend to exaggerate. She said that this was pretty accurate. Rachel asked that I add something. "Tell them, Rachel said, that there was nothing to be afraid of. The people at Amazon Park were no different than you or me. Through the flip of a coin you could be in their shoes, she explained. To be homeless doesn't change your character. It is based on a circumstance. "

Bill and I still believe that it is important to give *tzedakah* to local organizations that help people who are homeless and to those who are hungry. We also decided to incorporate the teachings of our daughter, Rachel Wolfe-Goldsmith; we also give to people on the streets and we talk to them when we do. I have friends who prefer to keep snacks in their car and find giving food rather than money as their way to help their neighbor. Jewish tradition teaches us that it is more valuable to help someone to become more self sufficient than to simply give them food or money. Yet we are also commanded to help those that are less fortunate than us. We must all explore and discover our own way to give; we must look deeply into ourselves.

### **Feed the hungry**

I have a friend. He owns a restaurant in town that's open 7 days a week. He now has a cart that is open 7 days a week, 24 hours a day. For those of us who have owned small businesses, you know that it is no easy task. Your day never seems to end. My friend donates food weekly from his restaurant to Food for Lane County's Dining Room, a local soup kitchen that looks like a homey café that treats every diner with dignity and creates a sense of community for people in need. If that's not enough, one night a week, my friend volunteers at the Dining Room, part of

a crew who serves food to the 300 or so diners that pass through the doors each evening – many of them homeless, all of them hungry. I told him I wanted to use his mitzvah in today's talk. He asked me not to use his name or the name of his business. That is his form of *tzedakah*. He gives anonymously and in a way that is face to face and personally connecting.

### **Shelter those who have no homes**

Housing, like food is a basic human need. Without a place to live and food to sustain you, how do you begin to take charge of your life?

I just shared two stories of giving as individuals. How do we give *tzedakah* as a community?

I'll describe two examples of collaborative efforts between the faith community, local government, business, non-profits, community volunteers, and homeless people themselves. There is an immense power in joining together in unique community combinations to make these acts of *tzedakah* happen. I will briefly describe to you the Egan Warming Center (last year's overflow extreme weather shelter for people who were homeless in freezing temperatures) and Project Homeless Connect (a one day, one stop shop that offers critical services to people that are homeless).

Last winter was one of the coldest in Oregon. Record breaking snow fall and freezing temperatures filled the weather reports. On December 16<sup>th</sup>, Thomas Egan, a 60-year-old homeless veteran froze to death on the streets of Lane County. At first no one knew who he was. How this could this happen? How could a person die out there, alone in the snow?

On the same day that Thomas Egan died (a tragedy that at this point was unbeknownst to folks in the faith community); churches had already begun to open their doors to invite people in from the cold. In the following days, five churches in Springfield and Eugene opened their doors to homeless people, initially organized by a local grass-roots organization, Community Alliance of Lane County/SAFER, Springfield Alliance of Equality and Respect. It was headed by veteran community activist Marion Malcolm (a TBI member). She apparently wasn't alone in waking up one freezing and snowy morning realizing that it was just too cold for homeless people to survive.

She quickly garnered the help of three Springfield churches: They offered their buildings for six nights as an extreme weather emergency shelter. FOOD for Lane County delivered food to the doors of these churches for the people who came in from the bitter cold. The Human Services Commission, the county's anti-poverty program, quickly allocated funds for motel vouchers, sleeping bags, blankets and other basics. Folks who work all day in local human service agencies were also among the volunteers who spent the night at these churches. The community quickly patched together a makeshift shelter. Well over 100 people sought refuge in these churches, an asylum from the cold.

When the county came forward with the old National Armory on MLK Blvd, the project became known as the Egan Memorial Warming Center which opened it doors when the temperature

fell below 32 degrees. The combined church and Armory efforts resulted in a total of 905 shelter beds over the course of 13 nights between December and March.

With the help of more than 100 volunteers, including homeless guests themselves, members of the faith and activist communities (including members of the Jewish Federation's Jewish Community Relations Council), 1,200 meals were provided, resources were distributed including sleeping bags, blankets, clothing, hygiene items and bus tokens. Homeless and housed people worked together to clean the building, serve food, fold blankets, store bikes and bags. A homeless man coordinated food efforts and other homeless guests helped with break down, set up and provided security at the Armory site. Katy Bloch, another TBI member, was a compassionate and selfless leader for the Egan Warming Center.

Here's one last community *tzedakah* story before I'm done today.

In a county-wide effort to help the area's growing homeless population, Project Homeless Connect for Lane County held its third annual outreach event last March at the Lane Events Center at the Fairgrounds. My Project Homeless Connect co-chair Richie Weinman (another TBI member), I have had the privilege to be a small part of this one-day, one-stop shop that offers support and quality of life services to individuals and families who are without safe and stable homes.

People who are homeless or at risk of homelessness were invited to come and receive critical services and basic provisions. On March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1,548 people received help from more than 600 community volunteers, along with 281 professional service providers. Homeless guests were offered medical exams, dental checkups, vision care, hot meals, haircuts, bike repair, and much more. Mental health services, housing assistance, food, clothing, legal counsel, addiction treatment, and a variety of services were made available for youth, families, seniors and veterans.

We gave away basic items such as coats, sleeping bags, socks, scarves, hats, gloves, children's clothing and personal hygiene items. Throughout the day, LTD provided free round-trip transportation to and from the event and for follow up appointments after the event.

We had to close the volunteer registration days before the event took place because the response to help was so overwhelming.

Project Homeless Connect generated awareness and provided solutions that work toward ending homelessness for some.

It is a form of *tzedakah* to connect directly in an intimate exchange with someone who needs your help. It is a two-way gift. Everyone who donated their time and energy to PHC received ten fold of what they gave. And there was deep learning that occurred that day. One volunteer commented: *I guess I really didn't know what homelessness was until today.*

*A community leader shared: I personally was very inspired by the outpouring of good will from our community. I was moved and saddened by the depth of need and the many really vulnerable people who live in crushing, chronic poverty.*

These individual and collective acts of charity are ones that we have the opportunity to perform in daily our lives. We here at TBI will host the Interfaith Homeless Shelter for a week in April 2010. The Jewish Federation hosts Mitzvah Day, an opportunity to directly help a number of our local agencies. Soon TBI will be sponsoring a homeless family or individual through the Overnight Camping Program in a trailer on the TBI property. As a result of that action, we will end homelessness for one family.

I want to make another connection to Jewishness and homelessness and I wanted to somehow work in long distance bicycling into my talk. I'm part of a bike team with Debra Weinman, Richie Weinman and Michael Saul. When we ride, we talk about our family, friends, jobs, books movies and restaurants to distract us from the steep hills. We learned something from our friend, Debra Weinman during our ride because of her amazing work for the Jewish Federation. She taught us that the Jewish community also struggles with homelessness and there is a need to help with housing and hunger and face multiple problems in their lives. We learned that the Jewish community is not immune from homelessness as a social problem.

When we do acts of charity, as a congregation or as an individual, we receive the blessing of being able to witness both despair and hope.

I will close today with something that stayed with me long after I left my work at the New Roads Program. During a homeless youth forum we held for elected officials, I asked one of our program clients to describe to the audience the hardest thing for her about being homeless.

She answered without hesitation: "It's when people look the other way when they see me or cross the street to get away from me. I think that is the hardest part of being homeless. "

As we continue our meditation and prayers on this holiest of days, let us return to the roots of our faith, a religion based on survival, compassion and the mitzvah of giving.