

First Person Plural

By Student Rabbi Joe Hample 10/9/08
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Happy Thursday. Just another day, right? You got up. Maybe you skipped breakfast, as you often do when you're running late. So here you are at Pico and Kenwood, in that itchy jacket or those painful shoes. And you look lovely, you really do. But a part of you is still wondering if this day is really any different from yesterday or tomorrow. What would actually make it different?

Regretting our mistakes doesn't make this day different. I regret my mistakes every day of my life. On even-numbered days I regret my career mistakes, and on odd-numbered days I regret my erotic mistakes. Big deal.

Fasting doesn't make this day different. In my younger years I often went a day or two without eating, to control my weight. It worked, but there wasn't anything holy about it.

Wearing our most uncomfortable outfit doesn't make this day different. You do that when you go to a job interview, or the first time you meet your in-laws. It shows you take the occasion seriously. But donning your stiffest clothes doesn't guarantee that the day will change your life.

What makes today different is that we're doing all these things together, as a community. If you fasted alone, or self-recriminated alone, it would just be a depressing Thursday. But to share it with hundreds of your co-religionists: now that's spiritual.

As a language maven, I often puzzle over the grammatical quirks of our liturgy. The priestly blessing is in the singular: Y'varech'cha Adonai v'yishm'recha, may the Eternal bless you alone, just you. But the confessional prayers are in the plural: Ashamnu, we have transgressed; Al chet she-chatanu, for the sin we have committed. The High Holidays are meant to be a group experience. Fasting also builds our esprit de corps, our sense of being in this together. I'm not the only one here with a splitting headache from forgoing my morning coffee. We are all in the same boat. Because we are first person plural.

What are we going to do with the religious energy that comes from being first person plural? We get some directions from God in today's haftarah, Isaiah 58. "Is not this the fast I have chosen: break the bonds of cruelty, and let the oppressed go free; share your bread with the hungry; and when you see the naked, clothe them (Isa. 58:6-7)." Does that resonate? I thought so! We are a congregation that cares about human rights. Many at BCC have been involved with social action initiatives: Tz'dakah Council or Project Chicken Soup, Caring Community or Project Caring, Bridges to Understanding or Jewish World Watch. Think globally, act locally. As it says in Pirkei Avot (1:2), the world stands on three things: al ha-Torah, learning; al ha-avodah, service; and al g'milut chasadim, merciful deeds. Acts of compassion are one of the best ways we connect with God.

That first person plural is so powerful, I wonder if there isn't some way to expand it. What

if our spirituality-through-justice were not only individual efforts, and not even just a BCC endeavor? What if it united us with other communities of faith, also schools and labor unions and neighborhood groups? That might sound scary or too complicated, but a number of synagogues are doing it.

Last May, my immediate predecessor, former BCC Student Rabbi Daniel Mikelberg, sermonized for us about a justice coalition called OneLA. OneLA is the local affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, organized in 1940 by the legendary Jewish activist Saul Alinsky, author of *Rules for Radicals*. Wilshire Boulevard Temple and Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills are working with OneLA. So is Temple Isaiah, the synagogue whose facilities we occupy during these Days of Awe. There's even an Orthodox synagogue participating, B'nai David-Judea on Pico near Robertson, as well as churches and secular organizations.

Over the summer I did an interfaith chaplaincy at a New York hospital and got a glimpse of how exciting it is to work with people of other religions who share our social and ethical views. OneLA involvement would give our entire congregation a taste of that opportunity. It would bring BCC together by starting a conversation about our social justice convictions. It would raise our profile in the larger Los Angeles social action community. It would hone our organizing skills and teach us how to get our voices heard in this vast and noisy metropolis. Maybe it would even give us some bold ways to use the building we've just bought.

The director of OneLA is Sister Maribeth Larkin. I know her: she teaches at my seminary, Hebrew Union College. Sister Maribeth is coming to visit BCC in a couple of months and give us her presentation. Then we'll see how we all feel about it. I'm pretty sure we're going to like it. As I noted already, BCCers and the BCC community incline toward social action. Bear in mind that OneLA doesn't duplicate programs already in place. It builds connection to like-minded congregations and organizations elsewhere in town, and leverages the energy and inspiration of groups and individuals that share our values. We've got a lot on our plates, but OneLA isn't a nebulous open-ended commitment: it's a plan to identify small manageable ways to make a difference. The nation's problems are big, beyond what we can fix: but OneLA addresses local projects.

If we decide to follow this path, here's what they'll want us to do. First, we'll recruit a core group of volunteers to get the training. Those volunteers will then meet with the whole congregation, one-on-one or in small groups, to hear what people's social action priorities are and why. In fact, we can practice such a process this afternoon, during the break between services. A few BCC volunteers will be leading a focus group with any congregants who care to revisit our dreams and expectations for our new facility. Now's the time: we're in escrow.

Moving a couple of blocks up Pico Blvd. is going to make an interesting story. OneLA's whole philosophy of mobilization depends on stories. If you care passionately about hunger or education or health care, that's great. Now tell me the story of how you became concerned with this issue. Stories define who we are. Stories make abstractions tangible, stories make God tangible!

The OneLA philosophy revolves around relationships. We're not just going to pick an issue and work on it, we're going to grow relationships: that's what makes the endeavor spiritual, transformational, bonding. It might be a year or two before the process matures into a major social action initiative, just as it will be a year or two before 6090 Pico becomes our congregational home, but that's fine. It's worth doing this thing right.

What goals would we focus on? That's up to us to decide together. Temple Emanuel is working on elder care. Wilshire Boulevard Temple is working on homelessness and affordable housing. Inner-city churches often work on neighborhood quality of life, or immigration. OneLA's counterpart in Massachusetts has worked on gay marriage, and that could be important here in California, according to what happens on Election Day. There are all kinds of possible themes to consider. Let's figure out how we can have the most impact.

It's easy to make a show of religion: to obsess about the equipment and the refreshments, the tunes and the tallises, the crown on the Torah and the color of the handout. Don't get me wrong, it's great to worship festively: we call that *hiddur mitzvah*, beautifying the commandment. But first you've got to have the commandment, before you can beautify it. Over the ark here we read words from Deuteronomy (16:20): *Tzedek tzedek tirdof*, justice justice you shall pursue. The rest of the verse is: *l'ma'an tichyeh v'yarashta et ha-aretz*, that you may live and inherit the land. At BCC we've been inheriting the land for 36 years, double *chai*: we're doing something right. But to make it last another 36 years? The Torah suggests that hinges on our social conscience!

When Moses came to read God's commandments to the Israelites, they famously exclaimed, *Na'aseh v'nishma*, we will do and we will hear (Ex. 24:7). The people were ready to obey even before they knew the content of the instructions. Equally impressive is the phraseology with *we*: not I will do and hear, or someone will do and hear; not the rabbi will do and hear, or the committee chair will do and hear; but we will do and hear. That *we* is how the world gets changed, that first person plural. The gap between Thursday and Yom Kippur is bridged by the one word *we*. What we commit to, as a congregation, as a community, as a people, is what makes this day holy.