

Yom Kippur Day Sermon 2021
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All The World

In 2017, Dr. Peter J. Hotez, President of the Sabin Vaccine Institute and Dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine (among others), wrote a paper with a startling title: *'Science Tikkun: Repairing the World through the Science of Neglected Diseases, Science Diplomacy and Public Engagement.'*

This article was sent to me by a dear scientist-congregant at the beginning of the pandemic and my rabbinic ears perked up immediately when I heard the Hebrew word 'Tikkun'. It is inevitable that our mind is cast towards 'Tikkun Olam', the repair of the world—the ageless Jewish principle of contributing to the healing of our world and the human family, as envisioned by the Rabbis and mystics. More specifically, encapsulated by the Aleinu prayer which we recite with passionate grandeur during the High Holiday season: *'letaken ha'olam b'malchut Shaddai'* - 'to repair the world under the Sovereignty of the Almighty.'

In a classic case of the 'are they Jewish?' game, I couldn't help but wonder whether Dr. Hotez was Jewish. And I also knew that, regardless of the answer, I needed to use this article as the basis of a High Holiday sermon during a global pandemic. (Turns out that, friends, Wikipedia never disappoints: 'Hotez was born in Harford, Connecticut, to a Jewish family.')

Hotez is a prolific researcher, writer, scientist and physician who has lent his expertise on the current pandemic and even written a book, published this past year, called *'Preventing the Next Pandemic - Vaccine Diplomacy in a Time of Anti-science'* which a review in *The Lancet* described as 'a modern personal odyssey by an inspiring global health warrior... [taking] the reader through the worlds of global health, diseases of the impoverished... into science diplomacy and towards a vision for a healthier future.' In his 2017 article, I quote Dr. Hotez (with the risk of sounding like a graduate student) as he writes:

“...wrenching forces linked to a new human-induced geological epoch known as the Anthropocene, including climate change, urbanization and deforestation, human migrations and conflict, are currently promoting the widespread emergence of vector borne NTDs [neglected tropical diseases]... as well as Ebola virus infection. The major vector-borne diseases on the sharp increase include dengue, chikungunya, Zika virus infection, leishmaniasis, schistosomiasis, and others.” Then, chillingly, with 2020 hindsight, he continues: “There is also a range of zoonotic respiratory virus infections.”

Dr. Hotez argues that “we urgently need new drugs, diagnostics, and vaccines for these new Anthropocene-driven diseases” and that “recent finding that these infections now mostly strike people who live in poverty in large and wealthier G20 economies – a concept known as ‘blue marble health’ – indicates that the problem is

not necessarily the lack of financial resources, but instead the inability to mobilize those resources appropriately.”

In short, Dr. Hotez is being brutally honest about the systemic health (and other) inequities of our world. Like the visionary that he is, he proposes the particular solution of his ‘science Tikkun.’ And for a final time, I will quote Dr. Hotez again, in his own words:

“We define *Science Tikkun* broadly as an added role for leading US scientists to elevate the profile of their knowledge and findings, and educate leaders in the areas of government, business, religion, the military, the media and other sectors in order to improve the human condition. Through a process of science diplomacy *Science Tikkun* also seeks to promote international cooperation and scientific collaboration to improve the human condition.

The term derives from the ancient Jewish concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) that gained momentum in the 16th century contemporaneously with Galileo, William Gilbert, and the origins of modern scientific approaches.”

He argues that over a billion people are affected by neglected tropic diseases, often at the cruel crossroads of debilitating poverty and climate catastrophe. In his 2017 article, Hotez continues to knit together moral philosophy, comparative religion and the evidence-based science of both infectious disease and climate change. If his call to action was visionary four years ago; it is poignantly and pressingly relevant *now*.

During this High Holiday season, we have sat with and dwelt in the concept of ‘home’, through a series of ever-expanding concentric circles: the sense of home in ourselves, our families, our Jewish community, and now: our world. Truth to be told, here’s an unexpected secret: the High Holidays are not the *most*, but in fact, the *least* Jewish holidays of our calendar. I know this can seem baffling: after all, High Holiday attendance (together with the home observance of Passover) is one of the most common forms of Jewish religious engagement. Many Jews find incredible connectedness in coming together for this time of year; over brisket dinners and family stories, walking into a warmly-lit sanctuary, leafing through the pages of one’s Machzor and one’s memories.

Still, the theme of the High Holiday liturgy is not necessarily Jewish particularism, though a worthy cause it is. The theme is, in the words of Victorian liturgist and poet Israel Zangwill, is ‘all the world.’

The High Holiday season is where we think bravely, daringly, discomfitingly about the *world* and *our place in it*; not just through the sweeping idealism of the Machzor, with its rousing anthems of Jewish universalism as found in the Aleinu and the V’yete’ayu, but also through how we make our home in our world;

uncompromisingly committed to its repair and healing. If there was ever a time for *bold ideas* in our people's calendar, the High Holiday season it is. *This* is the time where we set aside the parochialism that chains and constrains us and reach into the common bond of the human family, and dare I say, of all sentient beings and embodied life. *This* is the time where the clarion call of 'Adonai Hu ha'Elohim' at the end of *Neilah* is not just a powerful ritual act but a radical shift in consciousness.

And we cannot imagine an age where we need that more than now.

One of the profound ways in which we experience moral injury in our pandemic world is through what has been termed 'vaccine nationalism' or 'vaccine inequity'.

While the United States has ample vaccine supply (and is struggling to convince the remainder of its population to get vaccinated; so here it is: get vaccinated!), as do other industrialized, wealthy countries, the picture shifts forbiddingly in global south. We know—all of us know--that right now, people are *dying* all over the world from what is essentially a vaccine-preventable death; not by choice but for lack of access to these life-saving vaccines.

We sit with that consciousness; perhaps we dare not admit it to ourselves. Perhaps we balance out this stark reality by the many cruelties of our age. Even so, the suffering of our fellow human beings matter. As the World Health Organization states:

“In some low- and middle-income countries, less than 1 per cent of the population is vaccinated... “It’s time for swift, collective action... Vaccine inequity is the world’s biggest obstacle to ending this pandemic and recovering from COVID-19,” said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization. “Economically, epidemiologically and morally, it is in all countries' best interest to use the latest available data to make lifesaving vaccines available to all.”¹

Let us sit with the weight of these words. In poor countries, less than 1% of the population has been able to secure a vaccine; including many of their frontline healthcare workers (not to mention the threat of new variants evolving). If there was a time to chant our 'Al Chet's' with solemnity, this is that moment. '*U'mi bamageifah*', the *Unetaneh Tokef* intones, 'and who by plague?'

The genius of Yom Kippur is that the scope of this day is both incredibly vast and deeply intimate. In today's Torah reading, we read of the immediacy of the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, consumed by forces beyond their comprehension. For the Avodah service, we will recast and reimagine ourselves as High Priests,

¹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/22-07-2021-vaccine-inequity-undermining-global-economic-recovery>

officiating over the purification of our souls. Between the Al Chet's and Ashamnu's, there's an urgency to the smallest of moral failings on our part. 'For the transgression we have committed before You...' Of arrogance, of greed, of envy...' Of how we have all fallen through the petty trapdoors of the human condition.

And at the same time, these small concerns are *not* insignificant concerns. There is a connecting door between the domestic economy of the soul and the planetary home we connect to species-wide. Amidst the smallness, there is loftiness; our deeds hold up the pillars of Creation, tip the scales of justice and gather the sparks of the Divine.

In truth, our tradition may exhort us, *there is no difference*.

In truth, the mission of Yom Kippur, as we progress through this holy and awesome day, is to see the boundaries dissolve and the profound interconnectedness of all being.

In truth, we take the cosmic perspective; the vision of the divine mind.

As our hearts of stone are turned to hearts of flesh, so too is our vision cast much more widely, until the ends of the horizon. We are called to love, if only for the smallest imaginable unit of measurable time, as the Holy One loves us all.

Naming the challenges, disasters, calamities of today's world may be the beginning of wisdom but not the end of this day. We all know. We all bear witness. We must all dare to admit, to hold this brokenness in our cupped hands. The summers are hotter; fire, flood and plague are raging, the ICU's are overflowing. Most of the world's suffering occurs in near-silent whimpers and whispers. But we know. We see, as God sees.

We do not need to label our dread. But we do need to confront it and confront ourselves and believe, hope against hope, that we are worthy of redemption and '*rav l'hoshiah*', mighty to save. And that we are able to love as God loves; and able to be loved too.

This is the great tikkun; the rebuilding of our house. Not just an acknowledgement of stark and dark truths, but an admission that our despair can be overturned by love. That we can pursue an integrative vision, a vision of 'All the World' under the banner of love, the sovereignty of dignity.

Whether it is shared scientifically by Dr. Hotez or morally by the Prophet Isaiah, it amounts to the same thing. If there is '*achat sha'alnu*', one thing we can ask, is for the ability to dream. As a fortress against the cynicism of the world, stands our Judaism.

As Isaiah preached in our Haftarah: (Isaiah 58)

“Why, when we fasted, did You not see?
When we starved our bodies, did You pay no heed?”
Because on your fast day
You see to your business
And oppress all your laborers!
...No, this is the fast I desire:
To unlock fetters of wickedness...
To let the oppressed go free;
To break off every yoke.
It is to share your bread with the hungry,
And to take the wretched poor into your home;
When you see the naked, to clothe him,
And not to ignore your own kin.”

No High Holiday sermon brings policy or pragmatism. We bring moral refinement, service of God and a deep, abiding hope. We bring a vision of unity, in the words of Zangwill's poetic 1909 interpretative translation of the V'ye'etayu's line '*V'yatu sh'chem echad l'ovdecha*': *'They shall build for Thee their altars, their idols overthrown; and their hands shall clasp in friendship as they turn to Thee alone.'*

That vision of unity is only possible with the softening of the calloused edges of the human heart; when we build a home in our souls for that very idea. Then truly, will we come home to who we are and what we are called to be as humanity.

As the Prophet preached at the end of the Haftarah: '*Az yibaka ka'shachar orecha v'aruchat'cha meheirah titzmach...*' — 'Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly'. (Isaiah 58:8)

May we merit the healing of our world and be empowered to heal it, speedily and in our days.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.