

The day is short, the task is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is enormous, and the Owner of the House is impatient.

Rabbi Tarfon was certainly not thinking about Yom Kippur when he taught that the day is short! We all know that Yom Kippur does not feel like such a short day. If you, like me, are already imagining the meals that are not to come, then together we have a long day ahead of us. So I apologize for the barrels of food that we are filling in the lobby – just walking into the temple gets me hungry. Thankfully I was able to convince Cantor Adler to remove the singing of Food, Glorious Food from tomorrow's afternoon service.

So we will move on to the second sentence of Rabbi Tarfon's teaching.

"the workers are lazy and the reward is enormous." Here he seems to throw us a curve ball – who is he to tell us that the workers are lazy?

Wait a minute, here we are, trying our best, having done what so many have not done – we have shown up for services, we have contributed to the support of our community, we have schlepped our children along,

we have given up our weekend—and will miss a holy day of college football, how can you say that we are lazy? But perhaps that is not exactly what Rabbi Tarfon wanted us to understand. Maybe he is just trying to catch our attention. I do not believe that Rabbi Tarfon wants us to ultimately understand that verse differently. Not that we are lazy but that we truly don't realize how much we can do and can accomplish simply by trying...and that leads us to the rest of the verse. The stakes are high, the wages are high, the reward is enormous – we do not have the leisure to sit back and not try because the reward, our relationships with others, the people in our lives are irreplaceable.

I apologize but I must take us all back to a very difficult time in the life of our congregation. It touched many of us but it may be a new story to some. I tell it not to cause new upset or to lead you back to your own painful memories but because remembering it can teach us to realize our power and the amazing opportunities that may be in our hands. Late last spring, our long time employee, the assistant to Cantor

Adler, Shayne died. Many of you enjoyed her friendly voice, her silly outfits, her grace and her charm. She was young and talented and vibrant or at least she wished to be vibrant. Many of our students preparing for Bar and Bat mitzvah knew her very well and she was just as valued a part of their experience as was their work with Cantor. Shayne's death was completely unexpected and yet not a surprise. Shayne had struggled with depression since her childhood, she struggled with depression every day that she worked here for nearly seven years. Many of us did all that we thought possible for her but her illness – an illness just as debilitating as any other and an illness that is terminal for some – her illness led her to take her own life. Our love and our attention and our concern did not, could not save her from the course of her long term, major depression. Our synagogue was Shayne's home away from home and we were her family. So we asked ourselves the same questions as do all family members grieving such a tragic loss. We asked ourselves, what could we have done? What could she have done? Shayne lost a chance for improvement in her life here

on earth and we lost a beautiful person. We all lost. But our greatest loss was in the sense that we felt less capable, less able to help another person. We look for others to blame and we blame ourselves. People failed her, medicine failed her, her family failed her, we failed her, I failed her.

These are normal feelings, understandable feelings, even necessary feelings. All are part of responding to the unimaginable and our spirits ask these questions because her action scares us so and even threatens us. It becomes our job to assess and evaluate the ways that we could have done more or that we will do more differently in the future. This gives us some sense of control in an out of control situation. But I remind you along with me, of the reality which is that when an individual determines that he or she will commit suicide then no one can prevent it – delay it perhaps but not prevent it. And with that sad truth, we must go on and yet we must somehow integrate this loss into our lives.

Now everyone here has lost someone, some by similarly tragic means.

Everyone here has been touched by pain and loss. And pain like this can be experienced through all sorts of loss. Many this year have ended marriages. Even though the divorce may be the best, right choice, there are painful, real losses involved, of the dream that one had for the future or even the end of a relationship with that sister in law that you really did like.

And this year, of course, we have had loved ones die – some after a long and loving life, some too soon and with too much pain – and each death, no matter the circumstances, each death shakes us and the pain is bitter.

We ask questions again – what more could have been done, what more could we have done, what was my responsibility and did I meet it fairly?

We listen to Rabbi Tarfon's words once again: in some ways they seem so very fitting – the work is great, the day is never long enough, the

stakes are high – but are the workers, are we lazy? He is not accusing us but challenging us and recognizing our human frailty, our human fears. He is urging us to go past the guilt and the pain and instead find a way to bring meaning and focus to our lives as we face our losses.

And thus we find our next mission for this coming year – the mission to re-engage in our relationships, to renew our commitment to one another, and to accept responsibility for the things that we are actually capable of doing for each other.

Judaism teaches that to fulfill this mission we need to look differently at life, take on a new vision, a new vista, a new way of seeing ourselves and our world

We begin this new way of seeing life by accepting our charge from God to look at our journeys here on earth as a series of amazing opportunities, gifts and blessings. These then create our relationships and it is through these relationships that we may ever experience God. As you may know, our tradition provides us with the opportunity to

recite 100 different blessings each day – and these blessings for our regular, human interactions. Through these blessings, we realize that God is in the meeting, in the human activities. God is not in meditation or getting the words right in prayer or in a textbook, although those things may be good for us or supportive of our growth. Ultimately, truly, God is in the meeting between two individuals and in the moment of that connection and present most powerfully when it is a moment of enduring understanding. God is in the power that comes from the energy created by two souls touching – through meaningful interaction

Every conversation that is empty or cruel or petty is a diminution of God. Every conversation that furthers understanding or breaks isolation or invites joy is an enlargement of God. Every prayer that leads us to better engage with others is an answered prayer, every reflective moment that causes us to be more sensitive, more caring is meditation which brings God in our midst. God is not a phenomenon to

be explained. God is to be experienced. God is not out there to be found. God is right here, in this room IF we actually engage with another.

Did you ask your loved ones for forgiveness this evening? Did you turn to someone whom you love very much and so can also hurt very much and did you sincerely ask to be forgiven for not being the individual that you should have, could have been. In such a moment of connection – not done over the internet and not done as a concession to tradition, but done from the heart, God is in the interaction, in the room right here.

How next do we re-engage and feel that we are doing all that we can to create positive, meaningful relationships? We look at life in its moments and do not only judge ourselves by all of the conclusions. The beautiful moments that were in a relationship are never lost, never cheapened even if the relationship does not end beautifully. Teachers know that the grade on the test is not the evidence of either the

student's true learning or their ability to teach. Rather knowledge, understanding is experienced in those aha moments with students. In fact the student may never master the material but may derive enormous meaning from even one moment of insight. The student's most valuable learning may come because she feels supported or empowered or simply loved. That is the critical experience. That moment of understanding cannot be lost – even if the student fails somewhere else along the way. That moment of learning is still something real, something to be treasured. That achievement cannot be discarded. Perhaps you have lost someone through the cruel disease of Alzheimers or perhaps that is a struggle in your life at this very time. Until any of us have walked in your shoes, we cannot say that we understand but I will urge you to listen to me nonetheless. I pray that you have remembered and will continue to remember that the disease did not rob you of the experiences that you had with your loved one, that it did not erase the blessings that had ever been part of your relationship. The moments that you treasure remain golden,

untarnished by the illness. The disease may rob us of the way that we would have liked things to end but it cannot, must not rob us of all that had been. And what about ourselves, how can we recognize that each moment is the key, that the here and now is the only reality that we actually can touch. We cherish the gift of this moment and remember that Judaism always allows, indeed invites t'shuvah, repentance. It seems so small a gift from God but it allows us such a different way of looking at ourselves and all those around us. Even in the midst of doing wrong, even after having done a lot of wrong, we have an avenue, a path to change. We cannot change those past experiences and their consequences but we have this moment, the present as a fresh canvas. Please do not tell me that you will change in the future. The only moment that counts is now and it is in our hands right now. Of course, change requires effort and action and commitment. It is not for the lazy. But if we can prove that we are sincere in making change and in making amends then we are permitted to look at ourselves differently and we are permitted, if they are able, to have others look at us

differently. We can use the good to challenge the bad just as we do not allow the good to be overcome by bad. (And sometimes we allow others may even earn the right to be forgiven by even one good action in the midst of ugliness. Not in every case and the decision to forgive despite all reasons to the contrary, that decision is held by those who have been wronged. But there are instances when ugly conclusions should not be permitted to harm us even further by destroying some simple piece of good.) We do not always know the challenge that lay behind the completion of that one good action. It may well not undo all of the other deeds but it may still merit forgiveness, or at least conditional forgiveness as we prove ourselves each day. Is that not what we would wish for ourselves?

Finally, we look at our lives in the context of so many, many lives. We cannot focus on anything larger than our next interaction. We do not know that it will not be our last. We do not puff ourselves up and make ourselves any more important than we are here, tonight and then we

are challenged to take seriously the power that we have, here , tonight. I am not speaking about feeling guilt about what we have or have not done. But it is time that we place enormous pressure on ourselves to do not just the right thing but the best right thing. It is time that we recognize that in the scheme of things our best right thing may not be recognized nor have any discernible impact but it is still the best right thing. It is time that we recognize that we are indeed the center of the world and also recognize that every other life is just as precious and just as much at the center of God's creation. And so when we experience failure in one relationship or simply feel as though our relationships are unsuccessful, we are still obligated to take the next moment and do the best right thing in that next encounter. Thus we see our lives integrated into the fabric of humanity and history, a mere thread but one which is necessary nonetheless

One contemporary Jewish teacher calls us to look at our lives as works of art. He calls this artful living. Thus we are inspired to understand life

as a creation that God begins and that we may continue in God's image. Each individual work of art strives for a life of beauty. But our Jewish tradition teaches us that we are not actually concerned with the beauty of the individual but the beauty of the life of an individual. We know the term mensche and we often use it to describe someone whose behavior is exemplary, inspiring. We cannot all be mensches but we can all strive to be a shainer yid – literally a beautiful Jew. Not beautiful due to appearance but beautiful because we have used our faith to fashion a life which is meaningful, which adds to the good in the world, which adds to the beauty of the world.

Dear God, as we remember those who have taught us, may we strive to become works of art of which you can be proud, may the moments in our lives bring beauty to the world, may we earn, each of us, the right to be called a shainer yid.

