Erev Rosh Hashanah 5787

You Were Hired for Today - How much is enough?

Broward Central Synagogue

How much do we need to honor our parents before we can say, "I honored them enough"? How much do we need to study, before we can say, "I know enough"? How many times do we need to visit someone who is sick? How much should we accompany those who mourn?

I would like to begin this sacred night of Rosh Hashanah with a story. It is a story about Rabbi Tarfon–or, more precisely, about Rabbi Tarfon and his mother. Rabbi Tarfon lived approximately 1,900 years ago. He was one of the great sages of the generation of Yavneh, associated particularly with the city of Lod in the Land of Israel. He was a kohen, a teacher and colleague of Rabbi Akiva, and one of the most prominent rabbinic voices of his generation.

But Rabbi Tarfon was also a son. And the Jerusalem Talmud tells us that one Shabbat his mother went for a walk in her courtyard and one of her sandals broke. There was a problem. It was Shabbat, and she could not simply have the sandal repaired. So what did her son do? ***"Rabbi Tarfon went and placed his two hands under her feet, and she walked on them until she reached her bed"*** (Jerusalem Talmud, Peah 1:1).

How much should we honor our parents? I **cannot imagine many of us placing our hands, step after step, under the feet of our parents because they forgot their sandals and we do not want them to burn their feet on the hot South Florida sand in the middle of the summer. For Rabbi Tarfon, perhaps the question "How much should we honor our parents?" was almost absurd. How much? There is always more. And even then, perhaps, we would still fall short.** We can imagine Rabbi Tarfon giving a similar answer if we asked:

How much should we study? How much should we care for the sick? How much should we comfort mourners? How much kindness should we perform? How much should we do to bring peace between people?

There is always more. And that is beautiful. But it can also become a problem. At the end of *Schindler's List*, after saving more than a thousand Jews, Oskar Schindler looks at what he still owns and asks whether one more possession might have saved one more life. Because when something has no established limit, when there is no required quantity, no number that tells us when we have succeeded, any conscientious person can be left with the same uncomfortable thought: Maybe I did not do enough. Maybe I could have done more.

Jewish tradition is very aware of this problem. **Perhaps that is one reason Judaism so often gives us precise quantities, measurements, and times. Judaism loves measurements.** There is a time to pray and a time by which a prayer should be said. There is a minimum amount of matzah to eat on Pesach. There are defined sounds of the shofar that we are required to hear on Rosh Hashanah. There are measurements for a sukkah, measurements for a mikveh, measurements for food, measurements for time.

And there is something psychologically comforting about that. Because when the requirement has been fulfilled, halakhah gives us a wonderful expression: **יָצָא יְדֵי חוֹבָתוֹ – "One has fulfilled one's obligation." I did what was required of me. I fulfilled my responsibility.**

Many areas of our lives work in exactly the same way. If our job is from nine to five, and we arrive at nine and work until five, we have objectively fulfilled the hours expected of us. If the IRS tells us that we owe a certain amount in taxes, and we send the correct amount on time, we have fulfilled that obligation. **There is something reassuring about external criteria. They allow us to know, objectively, when we have met the expectation placed upon us.**

But what happens with the things that have no such limit? **The Mishnah begins tractate Peah with a famous declaration: אֵלּוּ דְבָרִים שֶׁאֵין לָהֶם שִׁעוּר – *"These are the things that have no fixed measure."*** It speaks of mitzvot such as leaving the corner of the field for the poor, bringing first fruits, acts of lovingkindness, and the study of Torah. And that same rabbinic tradition, expanded in the Talmud and incorporated into our morning prayers, speaks of

honoring father and mother, welcoming guests, visiting the sick, accompanying the dead and bringing peace between one person and another (Mishnah Peah 1:1; Shabbat 127a).

What unites these responsibilities is that they resist a simple checkbox. What is the *shiur* of love? What is the measure of kindness? How many visits fulfill our responsibility toward someone who is sick? How many phone calls constitute honoring an aging parent? How much presence does a grieving friend need? How much patience does a child deserve? How much Torah is enough Torah?

When can we say יָצָאתִי יְדֵי חוֹבָתִי – "I have fulfilled my obligation"–when it comes to loving our family, comforting a friend, helping someone in need, bringing peace between people, or making our corner of the world a little better? **There is no number.**

And it is Rabbi Tarfon–the same Rabbi Tarfon who placed his hands beneath his mother's feet–who gave us one of the most powerful responses to this problem. A sentence that has accompanied the Jewish people for generations, and a sentence that I would like to invite all of us to carry as a kind of mantra–an intellectual mantra, but perhaps even more importantly, an emotional and spiritual mantra–for the year that begins tonight.

Rabbi Tarfon teaches in Pirkei Avot:

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה

"It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to abandon it" (Pirkei Avot 2:16).

This has been one of my favorite teachings of our tradition for many years. And I first learned it not from a rabbi standing on a bimah, not from a professor in a classroom, and not from a book. I learned it from a friend who is now a rabbi in Fort Myers, Rabbi David Arias. He wrote it on a T-shirt. We were young. We had finished high school and were spending a year studying in Israel as part of Noam, the Jewish youth movement to which we belonged. Halfway through the program, I decided to return to Argentina. On my last day, David gave me a T-shirt. And on that T-shirt he had written: "It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." I still have that T-shirt. And since that day, that sentence has never really left me. Tonight, as another year begins, I want to return to it.

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמֹר – It is not your duty to finish the work.

What work? Obviously, Rabbi Tarfon is not talking about every kind of task. Imagine my son Noah telling his teacher, *"I didn't finish my homework because Rabbi Tarfon teaches that it is not my responsibility to finish the work."* I do not think that would go very far! Or imagine an employee explaining that only seventy percent of the work was completed because, after all, *lo alecha hamelachah ligmor*. Or imagine paying a General Contractor to build your house and receiving sixty percent of a house, together with a beautifully framed quotation from Pirkei Avot: "It is not my duty to finish the work." No.

There are tasks that have clear expectations. There are responsibilities defined by time, quantity, contract, or obligation. Rabbi Tarfon is not giving us a Jewish excuse for failing to do what is expected of us. He is talking about a different kind of work. **The work whose boundaries cannot be measured. The work that our Jewish tradition, our relationships, or our own moral conscience tells us are vital, but for which nobody can tell us exactly how much is enough.**

Rosh Hashanah forces us to confront the uncomfortable desire to measure a life. Was I a good enough father? A good enough mother? A good enough son or daughter? A good enough husband or wife? A good enough friend? A good enough Jew? A good enough human being? Did I do enough?

And the frightening thing about these questions is that there is no objective answer. There is always another book we could have read. Another person we could have helped. Another phone call we could have made. Another apology we could have offered. Another hour we could have spent with someone we love. Another act of tzedakah. Another mitzvah. Another opportunity to say, "I love you." Another opportunity to bring a little more peace into the world.

If that is how we measure our lives, we will always fall short. And our sages understood this danger. They understood what happens to the human spirit when the task before us feels infinite. Commenting on the words **"Today** I command you**..."** the Yalkut Shimoni gives us a beautiful parable. **It imagines a king who has an enormously deep pit and hires workers to fill it. One worker looks into the pit and becomes overwhelmed: "When could I possibly finish this?" But another worker responds differently: Why should the size of the pit**

paralyze me? I am only a day laborer. I was hired for today. I have work to do today. (Yalkut Shimoni, Devarim, Remez 863).

You were hired for today – שָׂכִיר יוֹם אַתָּה

What a powerful way to think about our lives. Do not look into the bottomless pit and convince yourself that because you cannot fill it, there is no point in picking up the shovel. **Do not become cynical and say, "My contribution will make no difference." Do not become paralyzed and say, "Nothing I do will ever be enough."** You were hired for today.

There is much to do. Too much to do. Nobody expects you to do all of it. But you are expected to do your part. **Do not ask whether you have called the people you love "enough." Call them when you think of them.** Do not ask whether the time you have spent with your children has been "enough." When they are with you, be with them. **Do not ask whether you have learned "enough." Open another book.** Do not ask whether you have done "enough" to repair the world. Look around and ask what you can repair today.

And then allow yourself a certain peace–not because you have finally done enough, because perhaps there is no such thing as enough, but because you did the work that was yours to do today. Every morning that we wake up, we should be grateful that we are still here. God has given us another day. Another opportunity. Another shift. *Sachir yom atah.* You were hired for today.

We are not expected to complete the task of *Tikkun Olam*, of repairing the world. We are not expected to know all of Torah. We are not expected to perform every possible mitzvah. We are not expected to solve every problem of our family, our community, Israel, America, or humanity. Do not look at life as all or nothing. Do your part. Be responsible. Be conscious. Be attentive. Push yourself. But know your limits. **Do not become cynical because you cannot do everything. Do not despair because nothing seems sufficient.**

וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה. Neither are you free to abandon it.

And here we reach the other side of Rabbi Tarfon's teaching. *Midrash Shmuel*, in its commentary on this Mishnah, makes a fascinating suggestion. Perhaps these two halves of Rabbi Tarfon's sentence are actually addressed to two different kinds of people. **The first half**

speaks to the person who struggles, who works and feels that the results are painfully small. The person standing at the edge of that enormous pit thinking: I will never finish this. What difference can my shovel possibly make? Why even begin? To that person Rabbi Tarfon says: לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמֹר. It is not your duty to finish the work. Stop measuring the value of your effort only by whether you can complete the entire task. Pick up the shovel. Do what you can. Your small progress is still progress.

But, says *Midrash Shmuel*, the second half is addressed to someone very different: **the wise person, the capable person, the accomplished person. This person has worked hard. This person has achieved. This person can look honestly at a lifetime and say: I have contributed.** I have studied. I have volunteered. I have given. I have served my community. I have raised a family. I have helped people. I have done more than many.

And precisely because this person has accomplished so much, a new temptation appears. "I have already done my part." "I have already given enough." "I have already volunteered enough." "I have already studied enough." "I have already helped enough." "I have already served enough." "Let somebody else do it now."

To that person Rabbi Tarfon says: וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה. You are not free to abandon the work. One sentence. Two spiritual dangers. **Despair when we believe we have accomplished too little. Complacency when we believe we have accomplished enough.**

That distinction changes the teaching. Sometimes the spiritual work is learning to stop demanding the impossible from ourselves. And sometimes the spiritual work is refusing to retire from responsibility simply because we have already done a great deal.

- There is no fixed measure for visiting the sick. But if someone you love is sick today, call. Visit. Show up.
- There is no fixed measure for Torah study. But if you have twenty free minutes, perhaps do not spend all twenty scrolling. Learn something.
- There is no fixed measure for honoring our parents. If you still have them, call them, visit them. Listen to the story you have already heard fifteen times.
- There is no fixed measure for loving our children. But the next time they are near you, make sure they know it.
- There is no fixed measure for making peace. But when you have an opportunity to lower the temperature instead of raising it, take it.

We cannot abandon the work. Every day we are *sachirei yom*, day laborers. Our responsibility is the day in front of us, the person in front of us, the mitzvah in front of us–not the terrifying magnitude of everything that remains unfinished. **God does not demand that we complete the infinite. And perhaps we should stop demanding it of ourselves. But yesterday's work cannot do today's work either.** Yesterday matters. Everything we gave, learned, repaired, built, and loved matters. **But it does not exempt us from today.**

There is a beautiful Jewish idea embedded in the first blessing before the morning Shema. **Every morning we praise God as: הַמְחַדֵּשׁ בְּטוּבוֹ בְּכָל יוֹם תָּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְרֵאשִׁית "The One who, in goodness, renews each day, continually, the work of Creation."** Creation is not treated as something God did once, long ago, and then left behind. The world is renewed every day. Yesterday's sunrise does not illuminate today. Y**esterday's breath does not keep us alive today. Yesterday's Creation is renewed again this morning. Perhaps our responsibility works the same way.** God renews Creation each day. And each day, we are invited to renew our participation in it.

You were hired for today. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Today.

The reward is not only in reaching some imaginary finish line. There may be no finish line. The work of life, love, tzedakah, teshuvah, *Tikkun Olam*, chesed, learning, family, friendship, and peace does not receive its meaning only from some final objective. **Its meaning is found in the daily work. *Sachir yom atah.* You were hired for today.**

And this is my invitation as we begin this new year. Let us take Rabbi Tarfon's words and make them our mantra. Perhaps after the *Modeh Ani* with which we begin our morning, sometime before the *Shema Yisrael* with which we close our day, we should remind ourselves: ***לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמֹר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לִבָּטֵל מִמֶּנָּה. It is not my duty to finish the work. But I am not free to abandon it.***

Rabbi Tarfon invites us to stop measuring life only in decades, years, months, and weeks, and to rediscover the spiritual significance of a single day. We do not receive our entire lifetime at once. We receive today. What tomorrow will bring, only God knows. Our responsibility is today.

And perhaps that is why Rabbi Tarfon, immediately before giving us this teaching, also said:

רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן אוֹמֵר, הַיּוֹם קָצָר וְהַמְּלָאכָה מְרֻבָּה, וְהַפּוֹעֲלִים עֲצֵלִים, וְהַשָּׂכָר הַרְבֵּה, וּבַעַל הַבַּיִת דּוֹחֵק.
"Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the work is plentiful, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master of the house is pressing" (Pirkei Avot 2:15).

Hayom katzar. The day is short. The work is enormous. You do not have to finish it. But you do have to show up. You were hired for today. And tomorrow, if God in goodness renews Creation once again and grants us another day, we will begin again.

Shanah Tovah,
Rabbi Uri