

Yom Kippur sermon by Rabbi Susan Leider  
Congregation Kol Shofar  
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One of my favorite words in Yiddish is hutzpah. Does hutzpah figure into the process of teshuvah, you might ask? On Yom Kippur, I call this holy hutzpah. Granted, holy hutzpah is my translation of what the great Hasidic master Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav calls עזות דקדושה - a holy arrogance – a strength given by God to act properly, according to the values of Torah.

He also discusses another type of hutzpah called עזות פנים. This is not holy hutzpah, but rather the type of hutzpah that we want to rid ourselves of on Yom Kippur: plain old arrogance. But holy hutzpah, holy arrogance is another matter. The rebbe teaches us that in order to repent, to do *teshuvah*, to return to God, we must increase the holy arrogance within ourselves.

I experienced a great example of this when I participated in a multid denominational rabbinic mission with American Jewish World Service to Ghana in August. We worked with Challenging Heights, a child-centered organization working to promote rights to education and freedom from forced labor, and an end to poverty.

For ten days we seventeen rabbis lived and worked in Sankor, a colorful coastal fishing village a few hours from the capital, Accra, on the coast of the Gulf of Guinea - the Gold Coast in West Africa. Dotted with sails, the coastline is filled with brightly painted canoe-shaped fishing vessels. Nets of blue and green draped across the beach, anticipating the next haul of fish that are dumped into open ovens that smoke them.

I ask you today to help me to recreate something powerful I remember hearing in Ghana. When I call out the first half of this sentence, please respond to me with the second half of the sentence. The first part of the sentence is: “to whom much is given.” The second half of the sentence is, “much is expected.” “To whom much is given, much is expected.” Ready?

TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN, MUCH IS EXPECTED.

When I first heard these words shouted out, I stood on a dusty dirt playground at Challenging Heights School in Ghana. I gazed at a myriad of girls and boys clad in bright blue and yellow, the boys in solid-colored polo shirts, the girls in blue and yellow gingham. Their eyes were fixed on the

principal, who called out, "To whom much is given," and the children yelled back, "Much is expected."

I stood there in disbelief. As I stared at the children standing in the dust, I asked myself, "What has been given to them?" Many of them lucky to have two meals a day, would come up to us and ask for the food we were eating. Some wore shoes, but many ran and played in broken flip-flops. With the acrid smell of burning trash permeating the air, here they stood in this dusty yard. Surrounded by cement block buildings, with corrugated metal roofs, glassless window openings, they had few sources of running water at the school. "To whom much is given?" Who are they talking about?

This is best explained through a story. Little James who was sold at age six, was transported to Lake Volta, a far-away fishing center, hundreds of miles from his home, where he survived thousands of dives into the murky waters of the lake, where so often a tree branch would claim the eye of many a young boy. The youngest of twelve children, he was sold to fishermen for fifty Ghanaian ciddis - the equivalent of fifty American dollars. His parents needed the money for the rest of the family, and it was only enough to support them for a paltry three months. Once enslaved, he worked on the

boats; hauling and untangling nets every day of the week. James worked from 3 a.m. to 7 p.m., his tiny fingers prized for pulling the mini-size fish from the delicate nets. He was often beaten and deprived of food and basic medical care. After eight years of this horrid existence, physical abuse and mental torture, he mustered the courage to escape and find his way home. Finally, upon making it home, he was rejected by his parents and his village. With no home, no education and nowhere to go what was a thirteen-year old boy to do? Forced back into the world, James turned to the trade that once enslaved him. He was paid for his work and it became a stepping stone to an education. More than a decade later, returning home an educated and wealthy man, wanting to make a difference, he was once again rejected. Not just by his parents, but by the entire village. Why? In Ghanian culture, it is taboo for children to bring to light the errors of their parents. The village watched him suspiciously for years because of the shame he had brought to his parents. What got him through this was his mantra “To whom much is given, much is expected.”

These words have been quoted by a wide array of public figures such as John F. Kennedy and Bill Gates. But these words became the motto, the

foundation of Challenging Heights, the school that James founded in his own community.

As I sat on a hard plastic chair in the school yard, I listened to James tell his story. When the full impact of it hit me, I was shaken to the core. In the middle of this Ghanaian village, his words were like a shofar to my heart. My soul awoke from complacency and I began to feel the power of this man's holy hutzpah. He had been through so much and yet was able to give so much. He was so profoundly grateful and felt such a sense of obligation toward his fellow human beings. He did not harbor any rancor towards his family or towards his former captors. He has an unbelievable ability to forgive and to turn his tragic early beginning into taking responsibility for the future. This inspired me to come home and tell his story. He was a self-redeemer who rose up to redeem others. To whom much is given, much is expected. He was acting with holy hutzpah.

On this Yom Kippur, we all have so much to learn from James' story in light of Reb Nahman's teaching. God gives us the holy hutzpah to stand up in the face of evil. And you can't face up to evil without holy arrogance. If don't have this holy arrogance, those who seek to keep you from good will

succeed in doing so. We are here on this Yom Kippur to examine our holy arrogance, to ask God for the courage, for the hutzpah to stand up when it is moral yet difficult to do so.

Reb Shlomo Carlebach, (1926–1995), further highlights the dichotomy of arrogance in Reb Nahman's teaching. On one hand we want to rid ourselves of arrogance but on the other hand holy arrogance is essential to teshuvah:

Reb Carlebach says:

Deep down we ask the question: When am I supposed to be arrogant, and when am I supposed to be bashful? When am I supposed to speak up and when am I supposed to be silent? How can you know whether your arrogance is holy or not?

“What is *teshuvah*?” Reb Carlebach asks. “What does it mean to repent?”

Why did I sin? Because I didn't have the holy arrogance against my own self! To repent, to do *teshuvah*, to return to God, means to increase the holy arrogance within me.”

Holy arrogance guards us. Holy arrogance guarded James against giving in to his captors. It guarded him from growing up to become a slave master himself. It guarded him against the idea that he could comfortably sit in freedom without giving back. It guarded him against realizing the words from Deuteronomy (8:12,17), “ . ובתים טובים תבנה. . - When you have built fine houses to live in, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you say to yourselves, “ כחי ועצמי ידי” - My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.” Deuteronomy teaches that unholy arrogance leads us to think we are entitled, to think that we deserve more than others. How can you know whether your arrogance is holy or not?

Think of a time in your own life when holy arrogance won out - When you stood up and spoke out against injustice. When you mustered your courage and wrenched yourself out of complacency to stand up and do what was right.

This is what Isaiah demands of us when we read his words in today's haftarah: “Build up a highway! Clear a road! Remove all obstacles from the road of my people. . . It shall be well; well with the far and the near' said

God, ‘And I will heal them.’ When you grab a hold of holy hutzpah, you can heal your soul and you can heal the world.

One day, an African farmer turned to an American college student who was on a mission sponsored by American Jewish World Service (AJWS). The farmer said, “I decided that I am Jewish.” The young American looked at him in surprise. What did he mean? And the farmer went on, “I’m Jewish,” he said, “because I want to leave the world better than I found it.”

Leaving the world better than we found it is a profound outcome of our having been enslaved in Egypt. I am indebted to my rabbinic colleague Michael Rothbaum<sup>1</sup> for sharing his own understanding of slavery as detailed in the book of Exodus. As slaves, we were *kotzer ruah*, (*Exodus* 6:9), or short of breath. It makes sense: The Israelites’ physical exhaustion kept them from fully understanding Moses’ message of liberation. But the phrase *kotzer ruah* can also be read as “cut-down spirit.” In Rabbi Mike’s words, the reality of crushing bondage not only physically exhausted the Israelites, but perpetrated something far more sinister: it crowded out any possibility of

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to my colleague Rabbi Michael Rothbaum, whom I met on the AJWS trip in August 2012. Michael’s brilliant insight and writing form the backbone of this section of this sermon. I am grateful to him for his collegiality and kindness that allowed me to insert, albeit with a few edits of my own, seven paragraphs of his into my sermon.

hope, liberation or redemption. Think of it as spiritual asthma. The pathways of sensitivity and compassion and optimism are constricted, if not totally blocked.

Today, we might call it “compassion fatigue.” For those weary of hearing of the latest labor abuse, or government atrocity, or human-rights violation, it's easy to fall prey to despair or apathy. *Kotzer ruach* indeed.

Challenging Heights, a AJWS grant beneficiary, seems to have perfected the antidote to *kotzer ruach*. The details speak for themselves: James, the former child-slave who now frees other slaves (a modern-day Moses, if there ever was one); his miracle school where healthy children now clamor to study; the once-illiterate who are now computer-literate; the slaves who have taken on their slaveholders and prevailed.

This has happened in part, because of the Jewish desire to leave the world better than we found it, a core value of AJWS. As impressed as I am by Challenging Heights and James’ entrepreneurship, I am told by AJWS President Ruth Messinger, that James is one of hundreds of visionaries across the globe that AJWS has found and are attempting to fund. I am enthralled by the AJWS model of Jewish-based global citizenship. They have invited the Jewish world to take a hard look at the developed world that

reinforces structures that perpetuate global poverty. They urge us to understand the inequity of a world economy in which some families have so much, and some families suffer the ravages of not having enough.

To examine this is uncomfortable and it takes hutzpah. But it is the Jewish path – the Jew’s mission – to look at what others choose to ignore.

One day, Rabbi Rothbaum decided to try out the traditional Ghanaian greeting that he had been practicing. “*me ma u ma chi*,” he said to a teacher. “Good morning.” She replied, “*Me gye wo do*.” Uh oh. His knowledge of the traditional dialect now exhausted, he asked the meaning of the phrase. She explained, “It means, “I respond.””

Not overly-enthusiastic. Not glum or fatalistic. On its most basic level, it was just a response. Where the response leads is unclear. But it is, nonetheless, recognition that a response is possible for all of us, for each of us.

On this day, we recommit ourselves to our people’s ancient prophetic call to bring holy hutzpah into the world. Because, simply put, that is the Jewish mission in the universe. When others look at the problems in the world, and shrug their shoulders, we shoulder the burden. When others throw up their

hands, we get our hands dirty. When others say, “What are you gonna do?” Then we say “What can we do?” We say “*Hinenu.*” We say, “We are here.”

On this Yom Kippur, we have the capacity to reach the highest spiritual point of the Jewish year by fasting, praying, and doing *teshuvah* together. We are grateful for what we have been given. To whom much is given, much is expected. A broken world waits for our holy hutzpah, the aid to overcoming our *kotzer ruah*, the personal barriers that can hold us back. The Torah urges us “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof.* Justice, Justice you shall pursue.” (Deuteronomy 16:20) Our response is: Not only will we seek it, but we will put on our running shoes and chase it down. *G'mar Hatimah Tovah.*