

Completing the Task

If there are five “most famous” dicta from the Rabbis of old, one of them has to be: “It is not incumbent on you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.” It’s from the Mishnah, Tractate Avot, attributed to the great second-century sage Rabbi Tarfon.

I think of it every time I read our synagogue’s weekly schedule of events, meetings, and projects, especially those directed toward the needs of the afflicted, downtrodden, ignored, and misunderstood. This place has become the center of an astounding number of efforts that can be categorized as “social action,” “*tikkun olam*,” “interreligious dialogue,” “crisis support,” and on and on.

In September, hundreds of people in hijab, kippot, colorful robes, turbans, and plain American clothing came into this building under the auspices of the Sisterhood of Salaam-Shalom to screen an important film about Muslims saving Jews during the Shoah, but mostly just to get used to being in the same room together.

A few days earlier, hundreds more gathered here to work with HIAS representatives to map out a strategy for receiving and resettling Syrian refugees in our community.

A few nights before that gathering, I saw teens, parents and seniors loading up the vans and heading out for a long night of aid and interaction with New York's homeless as part of our Midnight Run project. It is only one of a dozen programs our Social Action Chevra keeps up and running winter and summer.

That same week, high school-age board members of MOSAIC – Westchester Jewry's LGBTQ teen support group – met here to plan their fall activities and to strategize about getting their lifesaving message to the general Jewish public.

Two nights ago our Tikkun Olam Chevra met to coordinate their next steps in the long effort to realize immigration reform. Included in their meeting was an update from the many Bet Am Shalomers who volunteer to tutor and teach immigrants at Centro Hispano in White Plains.

Next week our newly formed Mental Health Chevra will meet yet again. Their task is to reduce the stigma of mental illness in our community; to provide support for those suffering from mental illness and their loved ones; and to become a lifeline for emergency references when one of us is overcome by crisis.

Not to mention our Bikkur Cholim chevra, which met last week to identify those in the congregation who need a level of care and contact not otherwise available through standard means of medical services.

And our Shiva chevra, who last week kept four separate shiva homes up and running. Remarkable.

And our Green Chevra, applying Jewish teaching about partnering with the Creator to the way we live inside our building and in our fragile environment.

A few months ago we listened to Rabbi Uri Regev imploring us to get involved in Israel's struggle for civil liberties – civil marriage, divorce, and burial; legalized religious pluralism; essentially, separation of religion and state. This month we heard from a Middle East dialogue expert who wants us to become passionate about new forms of conversation and peace-making between our Israel Jewish cousins and their Palestinian counterparts in the land they both call home.

Next month we will welcome into our synagogue sukkah a group of Muslims and Jews to celebrate our pilgrimage festival, as a response to their having invited many of us to an *Iftar* meal during the most recent Ramadan. Some rather prominent Muslim leaders and clerics will speak to us. In our very own sukkah!

In December, former Israeli Shin Bet director Carmi Gilon will come here to speak about the need for us to continue to work for a two-state agreement for the sake of Israel's own security and well-being. A world-famous figure in our little shul!

All of this activity is the result of our *fabrente* (passionate) congregants who see the work of the world and want to get it all done. I've got news for them: *They can't get it all done!* They should cut themselves some slack if they find they can only do "so much."

I've got more news for them: They should not slow down. They should act *as if* they can get it all done if they only keep trying, and if they can keep convincing others of the holiness of their labors.

And they – and all of us – should be proud that such work is being done in this space, where the lights and heat and air conditioning are all paid for by our dues. Where the excellent custodial management and professional administration are all made possible by our monetary generosity and commitment, year after year after year.

Lo alecha ham'lachah ligmor – It is not incumbent on you to complete the work;

V'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimena – but you are hardly free to desist from doing your share (and maybe a bit more).

To a new year of doing more than our share, and of filling our *bet k'nesset* with ever more sacred work.

Rabbi Lester Bronstein

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