

Rabbi Janet Offel  
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Temple Kol Tikvah

## THE 'MEANEST CITY' IN AMERICA

A few months ago I opened up the morning newspaper to a frontpage headline that I found particularly troubling. "Report: L.A. is the 'meanest city' in America," with a subheading, "City criticized for its treatment of poor, homeless, who have been 'criminalized.'"

The article began: "Los Angeles is famous as the nation's capital of movie stars and rich and envied people. But its lesser-known distinction as the nation's homeless capital has earned it a new title: the "Meanest City" in America.

In a report released [the past] Tuesday, the National Law Center on Homelessness [had] named Los Angeles the No. 1 "Meanest City" out of 273 nationwide."<sup>1</sup>

It's pretty amazing to think, when the entire country is in the shape that it is in, that our city takes the cake as the worst municipality because of its treatment of the poor and homeless.

What a thing to be known for, isn't it? What a shame on our collective consciousness as a city. What a shame on us, a community of Jews, as citizens of this city.

Why is it such a shame on us, particularly, as Jews? In just a few minutes, we will continue with our torah service and hear the thundering words of the Prophet Isaiah, as we hear every year on this holiest of days:

"Is this the fast I look for? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to Adonai? Is not *this* the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to clothe them, and never to hide yourself from your own kin?"<sup>2</sup>

The prophet's vision reminds us that God does not desire our solemn words, our ceremonies of atonement, if they are not wedded to righteousness. Yet these words of the prophet seem too often to be just that, merely words. Two years ago on Rosh Hashanah morning I spoke of a call to responsibility, in which I noted that the covenant at Sinai, the one that binds us together as Jews, was not about the politics of nation-building, but rather about the shared responsibility of creating a just society. For especially as Jews, on this holy day of fasting and repentance we are reminded that we have a responsibility not only to ourselves, but to those less fortunate. I am happy to note that in the past two years Mitzvah Day has again become a staple program of our congregation and we have an active and involved Mitzvah committee. But when we are faced with the kind of problems that we are faced with in the world today, it is not enough.

We must constantly hear the call of the prophet and respond, more than we responded before, greater than our achievements of the past.

Two months ago I spent a day with Dr. Jack Mayer. A former dean of the School of Jewish Communal Service at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion as well as the former Executive Director of the Valley Alliance of the Los Angeles Jewish Federation, for the past couple of years, Jack has been working with the Southern California Division of the Salvation Army. Working downtown on West Ninth Street, he is a far cry from the neighborhoods that he used to frequent in his Jewish communal work. I had asked Jack if he would take me around to some of the Salvation Army centers so that I could get a sense of what is really happening in our city. Quite honestly, when I first began a number of months ago to think about the broad outlines of this sermon, I envisioned spending a night in a homeless shelter myself, to get a sense of the life that someone who is homeless might lead. But it took no time at all for me to realize that spending one night in a homeless shelter would make me nothing more than a voyeur, leaving the comfort of my home for just a few hours to “camp out” without really understanding what a life of homelessness really means.

And what exactly does it mean, especially for a child, to be without a home to call one’s own? Listen to these words of an 11 year old girl in an emergency shelter:

“You think you know what homeless mean but you don’t know nothin’ ‘bout homeless. You think homeless mean you ain’t got no apartment, you ain’t got no bed for yourself, ain’t got no place to wash off when you soil or you be sweaty. Well, bein’ homeless mean more than that.

It mean you ain’t got no next-door neighbor, no best-friend no more. You don’t got you own seat in your own classroom, you be movin’ so many time. Don’t know the teacher name. So who care? She don’t know your name either.

You ain’t got no good memories of holidays or the movies or even rides. You ain’t even got yourself bad memories. You know why? You bet you don’t! ‘Cause one shelter looks like the next, and soon you can’t remember how long you been in this one or that one. Anyway, it don’t make no difference. Not after a while it don’t. You know why? ‘Cause you be doubling up so many nights in the same bed covers, sharin’ the same potty so many nights, that one mornin’ you turn into the other person.

So don’t tell me you know ‘bout homeless kids. And don’t ask me if I understand what happen’ to my family bein’ we got no home. They invisible and so is me. I not here anymore. I died three years ago. Hey, you wastin’ your time talkin’ to a dead person.”<sup>3</sup>

“A dead person.” That’s what it means to be homeless in Los Angeles.

As Jack and I drove up to Harbor Light, a center for Residential and Outpatient Alcohol and Drug Recovery Services on Skid Row, I couldn’t help but notice the brand new and as yet unfinished Ritz Carlton Hotel looming above the Pico Union neighborhood. The juxtaposition of the two facilities was startling. How many of us will one day stroll into the Ritz Carlton? No doubt quite a few. How many of us will find ourselves at Harbor Light? I pray, none of us. For even if there are those in our congregation who may someday require in-patient drug

or alcohol treatment, trust me, one must travel very far from the West San Fernando Valley to end up at Harbor Light. Run down, dilapidated and spare, there is clearly a strong heart beating within this site that provides a new start to a clientele primarily composed of men and women who arrived there court ordered off the streets of Los Angeles.

Sheila Washington gave us a tour of the women's floors. Sheila's own story is one of redemption fueled by a loving family and strong desire to turn her life into something of value. Indeed, of the 53 employees at Harbor Light, all but 4 are alumnae of the program. Court ordered to Harbor Light for one year, Sheila was one of the lucky few who was not actually homeless before arriving at the center's doorstep. But she had traveled a path that saw her children removed from her care and her life in a complete shambles. Clean 6 years, Sheila credits God for returning her to her family. She is now a certified Drug and Alcohol counselor and is putting her own daughter through college. The focus of her work is clearly family reunification. At Harbor Light, seventy-five to eighty percent of the residents have families from whom they are estranged. They are presented with a structured program progressing from "social model" detox to job preparation and re-entry into the mainstream of society. The length of stay can vary, but requires an initial 90 day residential period. The greatest joy for someone like Sheila is to see residents reunited with their families, to see families making a new life for themselves.

Jack also took me to Bell Shelter, a sparkling new 500 bed homeless facility having just opened in its current location in 2003. Bell doesn't provide rehab services, it is truly a shelter for those who cannot afford to live anywhere else in this expensive city. The residents of Bell Shelter are men and women who have found themselves out on the streets, often due to the loss of a job, a catastrophic illness or some other economic hardship. Residents are housed warehouse style in clusters of 1 to 2 persons per cubicle. They are required to take classes, work or be actively looking for work if living at Bell. The shelter doesn't house any families, only single men and women can find a safe haven there, a foundation from which to build towards a stable life.

But the face of homelessness is changing here in Los Angeles and throughout our country. Once a realm primarily populated by adult men and women, today's homeless are increasingly seen in the faces of families. With the safety net stretched thin and breaking so often against the gentlest of breezes, homelessness has become the domain of families with young children. Studies show that within Los Angeles today, there are 8,000 homeless families. And the services for those families are not nearly what they need to be. The threat of homelessness looms constantly over most poor families who struggle to meet their rent or mortgage payments. Studies have shown that families that become homeless tend to share certain characteristics: they have extremely low incomes, tend to have young children and be headed by a younger parent, lack strong social networks, and often have poor housing histories or move frequently. Often, for women with children, domestic violence is the immediate cause of homelessness. In a national survey of homeless people, domestic violence was the second most frequently stated cause of homelessness for families, with

thirteen percent of homeless families saying that they had left their last place of residence because of abuse or violence in the household.<sup>4</sup> The Salvation Army runs two transitional housing facilities for families in Southern California. Combined they house a total of fewer than 100 families. Fewer than 100 families at a time being taken off of the streets and prepared for a life of stability.

Franz Kafka wrote a little parable called “The Animal in the Synagogue.” No one is quite sure of the meaning of the piece, but it is about a ferocious looking, ravenous, wild beast with flashing teeth that is loose inside a synagogue. It hangs out in the women’s gallery, and in time no one pays much attention to it. Each generation points out the beast to the next generation, and eventually nobody even so much as glances at it. Even the children, seeing it for the first time do not show any amazement, any sense of awe. The members of the synagogue eventually come to think of it as something belonging to the synagogue, their own special domestic animal not found anywhere else.<sup>5</sup>

How can we understand the wild beast? The words of Isaiah are our wild beast. The words that exhort us every Yom Kippur morning to turn from our routines and truly look at the world around us. Yet, instead we come to synagogue, hear the words of the prophet, and then stroll right by the homeless person begging on the street. Our world, God’s world, is not working the way it was meant to—and to be a Jew is to know that, somehow, we are implicated in its repair. The rich religious culture that we have been bequeathed and that we are privileged to bequeath to our children is that wild beast—ferocious, ravenous for righteousness and justice in God’s world. But we, we are like the people in the story who have domesticated the beast, lulled by its very presence throughout the generations so that we don’t even notice it.

When I first came to Kol Tikvah, one of the things that a few of the old time members were very proud of was the fact that our synagogue is listed as one of the founding members of the West Valley Food Pantry. Of the eleven faith community partners, Kol Tikvah is the only Jewish organization. Yes, we are very proud of that fact. But let me tell you something. The West Valley Food Pantry was founded twenty four years ago. In twenty-four years, that is the best that we have to show? Isn’t it time to again hear the wild beast roar loud and clear?

Four years ago, Pastor Mark Brewer of Bel Air Presbyterian Church launched Imagine LA. The program’s goal is to mobilize the 8,000 strong houses of worship in Los Angeles to sponsor and mentor the 8,000 homeless families currently living on the streets of our city. 8,000 homeless families, plus 8,000 houses of worship equaling a city where no child sleeps on the street.

The idea, as outlined in the fact sheets on your seats, is for each faith community to be matched with a qualified homeless family currently residing in a nearby Transitional Housing Partner facility. A two year independent living plan and budget are created for the family, based on the family’s goals. The Faith Partner Support Team volunteers help settle the family into long-term housing and then work with the family members as mentors and coaches to build the life skills and knowledge necessary to achieve the family’s long-term goals. The staff and volunteers of Imagine LA work closely with the families and

congregations, including providing homelessness sensitivity and mentorship training to congregational volunteers.

The pilot program, undertaken by five Westside congregations, two of which were synagogues, was completed in 2008. The results have been nothing short of exceptional—both for the families and the congregations. Now, Imagine LA is looking to expand into the San Fernando Valley. We have an opportunity as a synagogue to stand up and help lead the way.

This afternoon at 3 p.m. Jill Bauman, Executive Director of Imagine LA will be joining us to discuss the program and share a video about the project. Over the course of the coming months, she will return, and we will have the opportunity to come on board as a partner. We will need at least two people willing to give their time to co-chair the project for us, and all of you to help however you can—by offering your services as a mentor, donating furniture for the family, and other support as needed. This is what it means to be a member of a synagogue—to hear the mighty beast roar, and to respond. “To unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain.” Being a member of a synagogue is not just about a preschool for your toddler or religious school and bar mitzvah training for your child. It is not about writing a check once a year, coming to High Holy Day services and complaining that the synagogue doesn’t offer anything to you anymore. It is not about just saying that we all have a responsibility to make the community in which we live a better, more humane place, but actually joining with fellow congregants to do something about it.

Are you willing to donate at least 10 hours and \$10 towards Temple Kol Tikvah participating in Imagine LA over the next two years? 10 hours and \$10 towards helping to take one of the 8,000 homeless families in this community off of the street and mentor them towards a healthy, stable, successful life? Trust me, you will receive far more in return. A greater sense of connection to the larger community in which we live and to this congregation and its core values as a Reform synagogue, and in your heart, a realization that you are helping someone else create a meaningful life not only for themselves, but for their offspring to come as well.

I want you to look around at each other. Because it is going to be up to all of you to make this happen. As a rabbi I can go to all the hunger and homeless summits in the world. It could keep me running all over the city, the state, the country, the world over 300 days a year. But what will that mean for any one family that finds itself on the streets in this city? Nothing. No, it will take each and every one of us to make a difference in the city that we live in. It’s nice to call ourselves a social justice or social action congregation, but the wild beast is wild no more. This is our opportunity to make a difference. To be one of the first houses of worship in the Valley to sign on to this program. Let’s show the Los Angeles community that Temple Kol Tikvah really is a congregation that cares, that is at the forefront of dealing with the important issues in our city. Let’s hear the cry of the wild beast, and be awed by it.

For then, and only then, in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

“...shall your light blaze forth like the dawn, and your wounds shall quickly heal; your Righteous One will walk before you, the Presence of Adonai will be your rear guard. Then when you call, Adonai will answer: When you cry, God will say: *Hineyni*, Here I am.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Report: L.A. is the ‘meanest city’ in America” by Troy Anderson. *Daily News*, July 15, 2009, pg. A1.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 58:5-7

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.imaginel.org/program/2008/07/ssfh-program.html>

<sup>4</sup> “Domestic Violence,” National Alliance to End Homelessness Fact Checker, June 2007.

<sup>5</sup> I want to thank my friend and colleague, Rabbi Suzanne Singer, for bringing this parable and its possible meaning to my attention.

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah: 58:8-9