

**Who Are the People in Your Neighborhood?, Rabbi Sarah Hronsky
Rosh Hashanah Sermon**

Who here has ever been to Dodger Stadium? What about a sold out Dodger Stadium? Or the Staples Center for an event, Pauley Pavilion, the Forum!

Well this sermon isn't about sports or the best concert venue you've ever been to; but, I do want us to think about how big those places are, how many folks they hold. A sold out Dodger Stadium that seats 60,000, OR, the combination of Pauley Pavilion, Staples Center, and the Forum¹, this is how many people in the City of Angels who have no roof over their head to call their own. In LA County, there are 53,000 individual souls: men, women, teens, and young children, with no place to lay their head.

It is true that in our city, 30% of these folks that is about 16,000 will have shelter tonight, protection from all that happens on our streets overnight. Our shelter rate of 30% is very distressing, especially when you consider that New York City, whose homeless population is slightly greater than ours, has a shelter rate of 85%.

53,000 people in LA have no place to call home. This is a crisis; a moral crisis. One that we human beings have created. This is not from a natural disaster. This is **our** disaster, and so it is also ours to fix.

You may say to me, "Rabbi, it's not my problem, it's not my job!" "These aren't my people." "It's not my family member." "I've earned what I have, it's mine." "I will not feel guilty for working hard and enjoying all that I have." "I pay my taxes and my mortgage." "I work hard, and they could too."

I want you to know, I hear you, and I know. We do work hard, and yet these still are **our** people. They are us. They are our children, our mothers, and fathers, cousins, siblings, family.

And frankly, it could be me, and it could be you. So many of us are one step away from an accident that leaves us unable to work, or worse addicted to pain killers, a spiraling epidemic. One disease whose trial treatment could save our lives, but our insurance won't cover. One small moment away from being laid off, unable to afford our mortgage.

Today, it may not be me or you, but we don't know about tomorrow. And, as we know, our tradition is clear each human being was created in God's image, *b'tzelem Elohim*, deserving of dignity and respect. Our tradition teaches us that on this day, *Hayom harat ha'olam* – God created the world, not just for one religious group, not for one people, but all humanity. It is our job to care for one another.

We should dispel a few myths. The people on our streets are homeless, because they want to be. How many of you have heard that? This is false. Turns out that less than 1% fit that description.

They are on the streets, because they are mentally ill, drug addicted or alcoholics. Yes, this is true, but only for 1/3 of our population- what about the other nearly 40,000? And sadly, if you aren't mentally ill when you arrive on the streets, the trauma you suffer, the pain you suffer, the harem of silence you fall under may drive you to mental illness, abuse of alcohol, or drugs.

¹ A huge thank you to Rabbi Noah Farkas for his hard work in the area of homelessness in Los Angeles. His inspirational sermons will be referred to often, including his reference to Dodger Stadium, Pauley Pavillion etc.

How about the myth that the people who live on our streets are people of color, former prisoners, and men. Not true. Fact, there are so many High School aged children living in our community, sleeping outdoors, on benches, in fields, in abandoned homes. Statewide, California can boast about having nearly the highest numbers of homeless children, and the highest number of unaccompanied youth.

The myth that the homeless flock to LA from out of state for the good weather, the beach life. Not true. 75% of those who are homeless, reside in the communities where they are from.

While we play little league baseball or soccer at Sherman Oaks Park, we see people resting on the edge of the park, sleeping in tents, hovered under blankets. When we drive our streets or we walk our neighborhood are we really that blind to our neighbors whose head lamps glow along the LA River basin at night from with their tents and encampments? As we pass under the 101, the 405, the 170 do we see the people living there? Not under a roof, not behind a door that locks. Do we see the numerous people living on the doorsteps of the shops along Van Nuys Blvd, living in their cars and RVs along Burbank Blvd. and Laurel Canyon? Do we not see our fellow human being who is struggling? I think we do, but we are a bit paralyzed.

With the new Mr. Roger's movie out, it brings to mind the song: Who are the People in Our Neighborhood? Who are the people whose networks are so thin, circumstances so hard that they have lost their homes, their stability? What are their stories?

They are people like Sheila a woman in our valley community (not her real name). Sheila's husband abused her for years. So she finally got the courage and walked out. She took her two children, no money in hand, and left. Problem is she doesn't want to leave the area. Her kids belong to one of neighborhood schools, their friends are here. Their life is here. So, the three of them sleep in their car in their dry cleaners parking lot. The dry cleaner knew her for years as a customer, and his heart reached out. He knows that by providing her a safe place to park at night she and her children are protected from the evils of the street. He arrives early enough in the morning to open his store, lets them wash up in his bathroom, and often brings them food. And they hope that soon she will have the ability to find affordable housing in this area, somewhere and somehow, and the ability to save first and last month's rent. Sheila has no network, no family to ask, and no one to co-sign on a loan. She won't ask friends for help, because the shame of being homeless is too great. She fears the shunning, the judgement. She believes she is protecting her children more by hiding her plight.

And then there is Gary, whose wife fell significantly ill. Married for over 30 years, they fought so hard, tried everything, every experimental drug, any trial she could get into, and eventually she died. He hid the financial strain from her, to protect the woman he loved. But Gary was left with bills, heart ache and sorrow. No ability to pay, the bank took his home. With nothing left, he began to live on the streets, alcohol soothing his heartache, letting him hide from his grief. Gary says, "I don't want to be homeless anymore, but I don't know how not to be." While on the streets you can't imagine the repeated trauma he has suffered.

And what about our fellow TBH members living just on that same edge? One of our members couch surfed for years, moving from house to house of friends, soon wearing out his welcome over a few months and then moving on. Maybe we didn't label him as homeless, but that was his reality.

One of our members, a senior citizen, lost her family home no ability to pay mortgage. Relocated to an apartment, but now struggle from month to month. Does she eat, see the doctor, pay for her medication, or does she pay her rent. Right now rent is winning, but we know one serious case

of pneumonia or broken hip, she is one health struggle away from not being able to pay rent and being evicted.

And, what about the young woman, who we will call Samantha who stood here ten years ago, on this very bimah as a bat mitzvah. I remember her simple ceremony like it was yesterday. Her head held high, a feeling of self-worth and value, making her grandparents so proud and her social worker glowed right alongside of them. Fast forward, she now has three children of her own, is a full time student, and her grandfather died. This means she is now also fostering her two siblings. Recently her husband left her. Samantha is alone raising five kids, trying to give them a better life than she had growing up. Every month she is short \$500 for rent and food. Her network exists, we help, Go Fund Me helps, and together we try to keep her family whole and off the streets.

And what about the family of six, whose children were a part of our programs, currently attend our local public schools, and who have said thank you to me countless times for the food on their plates provided to them from our Interfaith Food Pantry. They say if they purchase food, they would not make rent, and have no home to call their own.

And no I have not forgotten, my children's former teacher, a dear teacher and friend from our ECE program, who we all see living in our neighborhood, sleeping on our streets. We've tried, you've tried, and when she's ready, we will support her. We will be her network.

These are a few of our community stories and our TBH stories. These are our people. They are our neighbors. They are us.

It is too easy for me, and probably most of us, to come home each and every night. Close our doors, lock up tight, and shut out the image of those sleeping on our streets, in tents, on our benches, in our parks, and in their cars. The denial exits, perhaps because it is so painful for us to see, to really see the faces of those filling our neighborhoods.

I think it also may be painful for us, because as a people, our hearts beat in sync with those who are experiencing homelessness. For this has been our story across history; the story of the Jewish people whose earliest roots are that of homeless wanderers.

Think back to our origins. God called out to Avram and Sarai, and asked them to leave their home, *lech l'cha*, and become the first Jews. And so they did, they set off for places unknown and wandered with no real shelter, running into much trouble along the way. Then, the Israelites would wander for 40 years in the desert. The very essence of our peoplehood is the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land. Where we dwelled in temporary fragile booths. Our sukkot, didn't protect us from the elements. We camped in one place, then picked up and moved to another. This was our version of a tent city. A full generation was lost during this wandering, dying on the streets so to speak.

Then later in time, we would be pushed out of our homes, out of our land of Israel, not just once but twice with the destruction of our Temples. Our narrative continues with our homes stripped away from us time and again: crusades, expulsion from Germany, England, France, Spain, and Portugal. And then we would flee again for safety during the pogroms in Europe. And of course, the homelessness of all of the Jews of Europe throughout the Shoah².

² Adapted from Rabbi Robin Nafshi sermon *Volunteering for Family Promise*

We began our journey as a people in homelessness, and across time this has been **our** plight. If we turn inward and listen, we will hear our heartbeat, in our deepest recess, our heart beat is that of a homeless soul.

So perhaps this is why we quote Deuteronomy 26, every year at Passover. Where God commands, "When you enter the land that God has given to you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest.... put it in a basket and go to the place where Adonai your God will choose to establish God's name. You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say..... 'My father was a homeless, a wandering, Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and wandered there.'" It continues that there, the Egyptians were harsh with us, oppressing us. And in verse 9, we read that God brought us to the Promised Land, giving the land, a land flowing with milk and honey. From which we bring the first fruits of the soil.³

What a powerful text for us; we are to be reminded our father was homeless. We were forced to wander. We were treated poorly during that time of our homelessness. And when we were finally freed, and able to live on our own, we prospered.

And, the text doesn't stop there. In times of prosperity we are reminded again, that this land is God's land. Not mine, not any individuals. We are to be thankful for all that is good in our life and we are to offer it. Not just as a gift to God and the priests, but in verse 12 we are commanded to set aside a tenth of our yield and give it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow to eat their fill.⁴

When we have finally made it; when we are in a place flowing with milk and honey, we must give back. To tithe ten percent of what we have!

And, to whom are we to give it? To those who have no land to call their own, to those who are the weakest in society. To those who are a stranger among us, to those who have no father, no mother, no husband, no wife, no support system, no network.

It is our job, when we have made it, to give back. As I look at this room tonight. Seeing your faces fills my heart. And I know, I know so many of us are able to count our blessings. If we dig a little, we know, we have made it into our Promised Land. We may not have the size of home we want, or the car we want, or the latest gadget, but we are doing ok. In the spirit of this season, of *cheshbon hanefesh*: taking inventory of our souls. I ask us to check in with ourselves. Let us count our blessings.

Most, not all of us, but most of us live comfortably, have full refrigerators, clothes to wear that fit this season, and shoes upon our feet. Most of us have a secure place to lay our head down at night. Many of us have advanced education, the ability to get a job, and get to and from the job. The majority in this room have the ability to pay our mortgage, our rent, a tuition, a gym membership, to pay for a small get away or a fancy vacation, or afford the simple small luxuries like Starbuck's stop, fancy ice cream, a new purse, a watch, whatever small thing we desire that day.

If this is us, if we can say that we've made it! Made it to the place that we so desired, our Promised Land. Now then, now it is our time to fulfill the second half of the promise, the promise to give back. To give and sustain those in our community who have not.

³ Deuteronomy 26:1-10

⁴ Deuteronomy 26:12

Our tradition offers specific guidance here. It teaches us that should someone ask us for money, clothing, temporary shelter, we can choose to fulfill the need or not to fulfill it. We can say yes or no. But, if someone asks us for food, we are obligated to provide it. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

And, when we choose to give someone money, our tradition guides, and understand that once it is given, it is not up to us to judge how it is spent. Once it is literally in the other's hands, it is theirs and they can do as they choose.

And, if we see someone who is lying on our streets and is ill, really ill not just sleeping or resting, we are obligated not to turn a blind eye or to walk away. We cannot stand idly by the blood of our neighbor as it is being spilt.⁵ No, we cannot. In this case, we are obligated to call 911.

What else might it be then for us to give, our tithe our 10%? It might mean that we provide a space for safe parking, safe sleeping spaces for families. Families for whom there is no other place, and who wish to keep their children away from the traumatic and scary things that happen on our streets and in the encampments at night. On the streets, one lives in constant fear of being assaulted, robbed, murdered, raped, arrested, harassed, abused, and more. Surviving trauma after trauma makes, it harder and harder, to stay safe and return to a typical life. We can protect the Sheila's by giving families our parking lot to sleep safely in their cars overnight.

We could give 10% of our heart. We can reframe our image of what is homelessness, retrain our brains from being afraid, to being open minded. End the stigma of seeing the homeless person as a leper, someone to avoid, to shun. End the stigma of seeing poverty, as a crime.

We have heard from those experiencing homelessness the silence, the harem, this is the hardest part. They are no longer considered human, no longer considered a whole person, whose heart beats and aches just like yours and mine. Their dignity long gone, stripped away, time and again each time we turn our eyes away, when we don't offer a smile or hello. The further alienation harms so deeply. Perhaps our offerings of first fruits could be a simple smile or an extended hand with a granola bar or bottle of water.

Our traditional Yom Kippur Haftarah reading, the words of Isaiah chapter 58. "Is **not** this the fast I desire- to break the bonds of injustice and remove the heavy yoke; to let the oppressed go free and release all those enslaved? Is it not to SHARE your bread with the hungry and to take the homeless poor into your home and never to neglect your own flesh and blood?"⁶

This text cries out to us to fulfill the words of Isaiah through action, and to be like prophets raising our voices and being the voice for those who have no voice.

I know if an earthquake shook this city and 53,000 people lost their homes, we would cry out for help, for aid from the government. We would raise money to rebuild. We would gather supplies to give out to those in need, raiding our own closets and purchasing items in bulk. We would bring friends and family indoors to our homes providing temporary shelter, a bridge to that time when their home could be rebuilt. We would cry out against those who take advantage and rebuild with gouging prices. We would demand affordable housing.

⁵ Leviticus 19

⁶ Isaiah 58: 6-8

If we would respond this way in times of emergency, as we rallied around victims of natural disaster, why then, why now, do we not become like the prophet Isaiah? Is it fear, disgust, blindness, or our anger?

I think our excuses fall short, and I know as a community we can do more if we just put our minds to it. I invite us all to dig into this moral crisis: to learn the real facts about poverty, to dispel the myths; to get to know these individuals as people, not numbers, not see them as trash cluttering our streets.

To begin this process, tonight and throughout the holy days beautiful stunning paintings by Stuart Perlman, an artist and psychologist are on display. He has committed himself to ending the harem; so far for 220 individuals experiencing homelessness in LA. He has painted their portrait, listened intently to their stories, and honored them through his art, his movie, and his book. You will find the stories for each person under their picture along our stage.

We know that faith communities are by far doing the most in the arena of helping the homeless. We at TBH can be one of those faith communities showing up and being partners in finding solutions.

On Shabbat morning, September 29th during the holiday of sukkot, our time of fragility, I invite you to join me. We will view Stuart's movie, followed by a discussion on what a TBH task force on homelessness might look like for us. Perhaps, we will decide to unlock the chains of the poor through our advocacy work, perhaps we will sponsor a day at a laundry mat and fill all the machines with quarters and soap in the hope that clean clothes lifts another's dignity. Perhaps we will figure out how to support our Interfaith Food Pantry even more deeply, knowing for many its food or shelter, not both. Maybe, we will talk about what it might mean to answer the Mayor's call for a Bridge Home, transitional housing in every community in LA. I don't know what we will determine, what we might learn, but I do know we cannot sit idly by and wait for someone else to fix this crisis.

Our tradition across time has instructed us wisely. Remember what it was like to be a slave, to be a person without a home. Remember, we **were** the weakest in society. We **were** those without support networks. Our tradition demanded of us to listen to the words of the prophets, and be called to action. And, it cautions us that while a task may be large and we may not be able to complete it, we are also not free to desist from doing the work of healing our world⁷.

I pray that this year of 5779, we be one of welcoming the stranger into our midst, opening our hands and giving the fruits of our work to others. I pray that we will end the harem of silence and indignity, and that we will take the time to really learn what is fact and fiction, what programs to advocate for and to resist, and simply how to see what is around us and be a source of protection, love, and repair.

Amen

⁷ Pirkei Avot 2:16 Rabbi Tarfon taught, "It is not your responsibility to finish the work (of perfecting the world), but you are not free to desist from it either."