

Yom Kippur Day 5787
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Congregation Shir Shalom
September 21, 2026

“Holy Sump Pumps and the Joy of Solving Real World Problems”

There's a moment when any home owner is ready to pull their hair out. When everything that has always worked, suddenly stops working.

Always when you least expect it, and always at the most inconvenient of possible times, just as you are heading out the door.

For seventeen years the basement of the Lazarus-Klein home had been completely dry. Through every blizzard and snow storm, torrential downpour, and blustery day, it was dry.

Snovember - dry. The Christmas Storm - dry.

Even when all of our other neighbors' houses were flooding, ours had always been fine.

That is until our luck finally ran out on a cold, snowy Shabbat morning this past February, when one of my children just happened to be having a sleep over with their friends in, of all places, our basement.

“Something's wet down there,” one of my children's friends informed me nonchalantly as I sipped my morning coffee. Adding, “very wet.”

Assuming that someone had spilled water or soda the night before, I went down with a roll of paper towels, only to discover something far worse - half the basement was under water.

Quickly grabbing our wet vac I raced back down to begin to bail out water like Mickey Mouse in the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Up and down, down and up.

It was already close to 9 when I finally came up for air. I texted my backup service leader Harvey Horowitz and let him know I was definitely not making it to services that morning.

But, this was not just any Saturday morning. It happened to be the morning of my High School reunion, which was scheduled to be held six-hours away in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, where we were to be the guests of my classmates Josh and Lori Shapiro at the Governor's Mansion.

This was something I definitely did not want to miss.

So, there I was, with the unenviable task of trying to get something very much out of my control, under my control. With a deadline of 1 PM if I was going to have any chance of making the reunion.

There was only one glaring problem - my sump pump. It was, I discovered, very much out of service, meaning that water kept flooding in, but nothing was flooding out. I was in a stalemate.

That's when I decided to call our synagogue president Joe Glickman to see if he had any ideas. And after listening to the situation for a few minutes, it turned out he did,

He explained that I just had to reach inside the sump pump and reset the plug. Easy, he said.

So, with Joe still on the phone, I hopped over the wall separating the sump pump from the rest of the basement, and reached into the cold, murky water, miraculously, finding and resetting the plug.

Wallah the sump pump instantly went back into action, clearing the basement of all the rest of the remaining water in a matter of minutes, with plenty of time remaining to head off to Harrisburg.

Problem created. Problem solved. And, even better - thanks to Joe - if it ever happened again, I would know what to do.

Most problems do not have such easy solutions. Most problems don't appear to have any solution at all. We find ourselves bailing metaphorical water out of our basements, even as more and more water continues to pour in.

These types of problems, either in our home, with our health, with our relationships, or with our jobs, leave us feeling defeated and deflated, out of answers for what to do next.

Every year on Yom Kippur we read about the ritual of the scapegoat in which the High Priest takes two identical kid-goats out in front of the community: one to sacrifice and the other to die in the wilderness. It is a grueling once-a-year ceremony that is not only exhausting, but extremely dangerous, all with the purpose of purging the People of Israel of their sins.

And, every year, I have to say that I feel a little badly for the High Priest. Because in spite of all of the effort and time he puts into his sacred duties, he must have known deep down that what he was doing was futile. This year's sins may have been absolved, but, even as he was performing the ceremony, next year's sins had already begun. Because no matter how exacting he performed his duties, the People of Israel would continue to act out, hurt one another and themselves, and in no time at all the High Priest would be right back where he began.

Perhaps, you can identify a little with the High Priest. Every year, we come here on Yom Kippur pledging to be better people, and, every year, because we are human and fallible, we end up committing the same mistakes as we did the year before and the year before that. Over and over again.

And, even if you are one of the rare people actually able to make changes in your life - you likely feel this sense of futility in the world around you. We, collectively, are forever Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill, only to have fall back down again as soon as we make it to the top.

Antisemitism, racism, bigotry of all kinds, war, political violence, economic inequality, environmental catastrophes all seem to be getting worse, not better. Where is this world headed? And, what can we possibly do to make meaningful, lasting change?

I hear it in conversations in our sanctuary, in the public discourse in the news, and, even more disheartening, in conversations with my own kids. The sense of hopelessness is overwhelming

Scientists tell us we have reached what they call a “singularity”, a point in which humanity can no longer see the horizon, where the future even in the short term is hidden and out of our control. In such times, it is easy to lose faith in our ability to make any difference at all.

I confess that I too started feeling that way. That was until Mohammad Darawshe visited our community for our Selichot service a few weeks ago and helped me change my mind about our shared future.

He was there to talk about his work at Givat Haviva, Israel’s center for shared society. Mohammed is an Arab Israeli, who was brought up in a village called Iksal outside of Nazareth. Of the 14,000 or so residents of Iksal, almost half over 6,000 are related. He and his family have lived in that same village for 800 years, over 27 generations. It was small, provincial, and almost entirely disconnected from the rest of Israeli society.

As such, when he was growing up, despite being an Israeli citizen, Mohammad had almost no meaningful contact with any Jews. That was until as a teenager, he was able to participate in Givat Haviva’s encounter program, a two-day seminar where Israeli Jews and Muslim work together.

These few days changed his life, propelling him to a career in conflict resolution and peace building. He learned to not think of the “other” as the “other.” That he had much in common with his “enemies” and could even build strong bonds and friendships with them.

Mohammad happens to be one of those rare individuals who can see the problems we face and is able to identify clear, attainable solutions. On Selichot, he described several of the successes he has been able to achieve. In the early 2000s, at the start of the Second Intifada, he was able to pilot a program to get Arab women into the Israeli workforce, almost singlehandedly raising their employment percentages from below twenty percent up to upward of eighty percent.

A few years later, he figured out that if you could bring Jewish teachers into the Arab schools and Arab teachers into Jewish schools, it would dramatically reduce racism. He started with six teachers. Now, there are over four thousand. It has made a real difference in the acceptance rate of Arab Israeli students in Israeli colleges and universities.

This was more than just a feel good story about Arab Jewish cooperation in a time of great conflict. It was about smart, effective strategies to solve any problem, big or small, anywhere in the world.

These were not just short term gimmicks, but attainable and sustainable initiatives that had a proven rate of success. And, If he could make meaningful changes in Israel of all places, why couldn't we?

After all, while Buffalo and Israel are very different places, we share many of the same societal problems: racism, poverty, inequality, crime and housing challenges.

I am tired of traveling down Jefferson Avenue and seeing the same problems that led to the May 14th shooting.

I am tired of visiting health care facility after health care facility that are not only inadequate, but falling apart.

I am tired of seeing so many young people priced out of housing.

I am tired of having to assign more and more security officers to our synagogue to feel safe.

Why do we have to settle for the same old same old? Why can't we make meaningful changes that make meaningful differences in our own community?

Here are some of the lessons I gleaned from Mohammad Darawshe's talk:

First, **do not tackle the whole of the problem at once**, but look to break it down into smaller bite size parts. Mohammad calls this “**making pieces of peace.**” Arab Israeli society had a lot of challenges - low employment, high rates of poverty and crime, low morale. Instead of trying to fix everything at once, Mohammad realized it was better to break the problem up into pieces, solving one problem at a time. And, when you solved one problem it often directly or indirectly positively impacted other problems. By breaking things down to bite size amounts he increased his chances for success.

Secondly, **start by identifying mutual needs**. In the case of Arab women, they represented an untapped resource of smart, motivated people looking to improve their fiscal situation with meaningful professional work. Israeli society as a whole had huge shortages of nurses, doctors, and teachers. This was a perfect match in what Mohammad spoke about as the superordinate goal theory. Introduced by social psychologist Muzafer Sherif in the 1950s, the theory postulates that a shared higher level target forces competing groups to work together.

Thirdly, **account for resistance**. Mohammad knew what he was doing would not be popular among segments of Israeli and Jewish society.

Take for example a recent incident, when a member of Smotrich's team demanded the removal of Arab teachers from Jewish schools. Mohammad did not react, listening patiently, knowing if he waited it out there was no way the minister could find the thousands of math and science teachers he would need if he banned Arab teachers from the school system.

Lastly, **do not just settle for smaller gains**. Mohammad spoke about a time when he resigned from Givat Haviva briefly because of its insistence on co-existence. He compared co-existence to a horse and a rider, they co-exist while they are on a walk together - sharing the same air, the same view, the same journey - but, he said, at the end of the day the rider goes back home enjoys his fine meal and the horse goes to the barn for hay. Just because something does not seem to be attainable, does not mean we should not strive to attain it.

We come here on Yom Kippur to fix the things in our lives and in our world that are not working. We make a promise to ourselves to do things differently.

Let us stop feeling our basement is flooding and we do not have the strength, time, or ability to bail it out. Let us find and restore the plug in all of our collective sump pumps to get our systems working again. If Mohammad Darawshe can do it, why can't we?

The future that we face is filled with both problems we do not know how to solve and that we have no idea we are going to face.

We should not expect easy solutions or even that we will be able to find solutions at all.

Not everything is going to be like my basement. And, believe me, as every home owner knows even when you have solved one problem, another one springs up after. I am currently working on another leak in the basement caused by a faulty condensation removal pump. Arggg!!!

But, like the High Priest on Yom Kippur who continues to obediently follow the protocol for purging the people of their sins, knowing more sins are on the way as soon as he is done, it is still worthwhile to try.

No matter how many times we fail.

No matter how overwhelming the tasks we have to face.

And, like I discovered on a cold and snowy Shabbat morning this past February, when you do decide to make meaningful change your Shir Shalom community will be there for you, so you don't have to face it alone (Thanks Joe and Harvey).

As Rabbi Tarfon teaches in the second chapter of Pirkei Avot, the ethics of our fathers, "it is not our duty to complete all of our work, but neither are we free to desist from it."

Let us collectively pledge to continue fighting for positive change in our own lives, in our community, and in the greater world. From your lips, to God's ears. May it be so. May it be so.

A G'mar Chatimah Tovah, a Good Sealing in the Book of Life and an Easy and Meaningful Fast.