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What Can I Do? Part 2 – Do Something! (parashat bo)

Shabbat shalom, thank you for tuning in to part two of this sermon. For those who weren't here last week, tonight I'm giving the second of a two part series to offer some guidance for those who have been asking or wondering: what can or what should I do in response to the distressing and concerning state of our world and particularly the grievous policies and actions of our government and some of our neighbors. Last week I spoke about the need for discernment and inner clarity before engaging in any action. Tonight, I will offer some ideas on what you can do with a few specific programs and opportunities coming up, and i want to start with four core principles that I think can override on everything.

One is that small steps make a difference. Two, you will have to inconvenience yourself to do this. Three, you cannot do this alone. You have got to make yourself part of networks, meanings, solidarity, support and action. And number four, you've got to cultivate tenacity. You need to stick with it, whatever it might be for you.

I want to start with a story about this man [show the slide of Blondy]. His name is Blondy Mayele. The thing about which I am most proud from in my entire rabinnic career is how we were able to help Blondy. Now that doesn't mean that your lifecycle event wasn't a high point of my career, or this Shabbat service, or any other, I am blessed to have a career in which I am proud to be a part of so many things. But when I look back I know it will be the way we were able to help Blondy that stands out.

Blondy is from the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he was involved in the Catholic Youth Movement and was

protesting, this was in 2018, against President Kabila's refusal to leave office after reaching his constitutional limit and alleged manipulation of elections in order to stay in power. Congolese security forces brutally and systematically cracked down on protesters, hundred were killed, thousands injured. Blondy was arrested and held in a notorious military prison where he was tortured and about to be executed. A guard heard his screams and recognized Blondy's village dialect as his own. Taking pity on a neighbor, the guard opened Blondy's cell, told him he was to be killed the next day, and needed to escape immediately. Blondy made it across the 200-mile journey to his village of Boma and from there his uncle helped smuggle him onto a cargo ship across the Atlantic. He got to Ecuador and walked from there all the way to the Mexico-US border, navigating the Darien Gap and all the borders. Along the way, he taught himself rudimentary Spanish and ultimately ended up in ICE custody in a detention facility in Baltimore. While he was there a DC based lawyer named Debra from Amica Center for

Immigrants Rights (back then it was called CAIR) she was there conducting legal seminars for detainees. The ICE supervisory told her that Blondy's case was compelling and he would release Blondy from detention until his asylum court hearing, but Blondy knew not a single person across the entire country and ICE just needed somebody who would vouch for him and take responsibility for him. So Debra began calling every organization she knew. Now it so happened at the time, my wife Elizabeth was working at HIAS, the Jewish aid organization and every day, when Happy, the receptionist, took her lunch hour, a different staff member would cover the phone. Debra just happened to call when Elizabeth was covering the phones. HIAS, for all the great work that they do, doesn't handle those kinds of situations but she told Debra she knew of a guy in a place that might be able to help. Now it just so happens that in those same weeks, I had been meeting with a donor who wanted to give a generous gift to help support meaningful social justice initiatives at the temple. I had also just heard,

unrelated, from another member who had a basement apartment in their house just a few blocks from here that had been used by a refugee couple who had gained enough independence to moved out on their own and if I knew somebody who needed the apartment, and they wanted to know if I knew someone who needed the apartment and they would hold it for a few weeks and I could get back to them and they would give it and they would give it to us.

Meanwhile, unrelated to that, another group of members had been working to resettle others in our area and were building expertise and resources and the network to help others when they arrived. And there were a half dozen, maybe dozen, other coincidences that aligned within that two-week period, so when Elizabeth called, Temple Sinai was able to immediately respond and offer support to Blondy. Our board authorized an affidavit that we gave the ICE supervisor. Glenn Engelmann, who is our current president, happened to be available on the day they let Blondy out and drove to Baltimore to pick up Blondy. And the

rest, as they say, is history. Members of our congregation who spoke French, one of Blondy's native languages, they came together to help, we took him shopping for food. That was Blondy's first day. He had only the shoes he had walked here with through a winter storm, like what's happening this weekend. The first snow Blondy had ever seen. We got him doctors who treated the symptoms from his torture and helped him document it for his asylum case. Connected him with lawyers who did help him win his asylum. He now has a green card. He's been working at Home Depot for 5 years and is about to move to Atlanta for a new role with them. He's married and about to consecrate that in his church. He has a son. Blondy is one of the great successful cases, and he's just one of many that I can share with you.

The story is significant because it demonstrates some important principles that we can follow today. It was not the single gigantic effort by one person, at any one moment. It was a series of small steps and seeming coincidences that

came together to literally save a person's life. Many people discerned what had to be done, and they were prepared to do it and they did. There are four general principles were all at play in Blondy's case. They worked then. They are supported by Jewish teachings and values, and these are your playbook for today.

1. Small steps make a difference.
2. You will have to inconvenience yourself.
3. You can't do this alone; make yourself part of networks of meaning, solidarity, support and action.
4. You must have tenacity. Stick with it. Whatever "it" might be for you.

Small steps. In terms of small steps, Blondy's story is just one example of the significance of a hundred small acts as they come together and we know nothing about what happened between Ecuador and border before he got here. But our temple's work on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees predated Blondy and it continues with the arrival

just a few weeks ago of Reza and Mursal Paiman and their kids who just recently got settled in our area. And they wrote to us, just a few weeks ago, they wrote to our volunteer organizers, thanking them for getting the kids registered for school and describing it literally as saving them from genocide. So if you've ever been inconvenienced by registering your kids for school, it has a much greater impact than some circumstances you could ever imagine.

This is exactly what our tradition teaches. In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Judah HaNasi taught:

וְהָיִי זְהִיר בְּמִצְוָה קְלָה כְּבַחְמוּרָה, שְׂאִין אֶתָּה יוֹדֵעַ מִתֵּן שְׂכָרָן שֶׁל מִצְוֹת.

Be as meticulous about doing an easy mitzvah as a heavy one, because you do not know what reward may come from that easy act.

You're probably familiar with the teaching from the teaching from Mishnah (Sanhedrin 4:5) , "Whoever saves a single life is counted as if they saved the entire world."

Don't over think this, guys, if you're looking for a grand gesture or heavy lift, stop looking for that. Look for the small actions. Lives may be going unsaved while you wait for some bigger payoff that you think is worthy of the moment.

Inconvenience. You have to inconvenience yourself to make a difference. Even a small mitzvah, like driving to Baltimore to pick up Blondy even if wasn't part of your plans, requires you to give up time, money, face some hassles. "Bryan Stephenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative often speaks about this and reminds us that changing narratives and seeking justice won't come easy. 'We have to be willing to do things that are uncomfortable and inconvenient, because justice doesn't come when you only do the things that are comfortable and convenient,' he said. 'We advance justice only when we're willing to do things that are uncomfortable.'" You will receive notices about urgent actions that come in with very little notice. You're going to have to change your plans if you want to get involved. And

you might not be able to do all of them. You may not be able to do most of them. But the only way you might be able to is if you change your outlook to increase your tolerance for inconvenience. You may have to drive or shlep or be with people that make you uneasy. Our tradition describes the march to freedom across 40 years in the wilderness as one of great discomfort and challenge. And that's not because suffering is good for you but because that's just the hard truth of how it is down here and you cannot let that stop you if you want to make a difference.

You can't do this alone. The third thing is you can't do this alone no matter how amazing you are, and you're amazing. Judaism emphasizes the importance of community and the power of groups. Whether it's Judaism's insistence on a group of ten, a minyan, for certain prayers; or Ecclesiastes teaching that a threefold cord is never broken, we know that community matters because it makes us stronger and it's how we bend the moral arc of the universe. You must

understand and commit to being part of a greater cause; of an entity that transcends and supersedes you, the individual. This requires the discernment I urged last week. Don't just join the first thing that gets your attention or is convenient because you won't be able to stick with that. Choose deliberately (not wisely, wisdom is too high a standard).

Have Tenacity. Keep with it – with your community, in particular, the networks that you join. This requires commitment and it requires humility. To do all these things, sometimes you have to submit to the will or authority of the leadership. Bayard Rustin was nearly maniacal about keeping the signs at the March on Washington in 1963 focused and limited to only a handful of messages that he and his partners had approved. And they literally had marshals removing signs that were not part of the focused message. It was not a free-for-all where every group and every individual showed their amazing creativity and shouted

their unique message. Tenacity also requires tolerance and grace. Train yourself to be slow to resentment and to let go of the one or two things or three things you might disagree with in your group or your network. My neighborhood listserv crackles every three or four weeks about petty grievances about the one kid who drives too fast, or the one house who insists on keeping their lights up all the way through Shevuos, it becomes championed by the whole squad, and meanwhile, the significant issues of our schools and support for each other falls by the wayside. Lastly, tenacity requires you to pay better attention and to take responsibility for being informed. Don't wait for some mechanism to hit you over the head or spoon feed you the information and opportunities that are abound. It's inconvenient but if you don't take responsibility and do the work for yourself to learn about what's happening, you're going to miss it. Here's one example I can share with you in the next slide. This is from Temple Sinai's Davis Center. This screen shot, [SLIDE], you'll see on the bottom left, there are a number of Upcoming

Events on the bottom left there. So just within the coming couple of days, there's an opportunity to volunteer at SOME on the 25th of January; there's a seminar here about antisemitism on college campuses with opportunities to get involved after that; on the 31st there's an opportunity to volunteer at A Wider Circle; on the 1st, the Davis Center is screening a film right here called Credible Fear about the challenges of asylum seekers and the loss of that right for so many; and there's a Tu Bi'Sh'vat Seder which will not only be leaning into the traditions of that holiday, but the connections to our earth and our responsibility for it. That's a lot of different topics happening in a couple of days, and you might not have known about any of those things but they are not a secret. And no one is going to spoon feed this to you. You've got to check this website, or the feeds, pick up the phone and call, or talk to the people at the organizations where you're committed because if you don't take responsibility for knowing what's going on, you're going to be on the sidelines. You've got to be focused because you

can't check everything, so discern, focus, and stick with the handful of channels or communities and keep looking regularly or calling. And help each other out, if you are doing something and you think another person you know might also like it, tell them. Despite the biblical characterization of the Jewish people, accurate though it may be, as stiff necked and short tempered, we are also masters of playing the long game. We are tenacious. 40 years in the wilderness to get across a space that should have only taken a few weeks? Maimonides expressed this tenacity well in his 13 principles of faith. In elucidating the core belief in a better future, a messianic era, he acknowledged, v'af al pi she yit ma meiah, im kol zeh ani maamin. Even though it tarries and delays, I will continue to be committed in my belief and my practice.

Fifth principle. Our tradition teaches us about the mitzvot Chai Bahem: You should live by them. And our rabbinic tradition interprets that to add the importance to the second part, which is not to die by them: Don't die, literally. I

frequently hear calls for revolution. For taking to the streets. For standing up in bold and dangerous ways. This is not how you should do this. And it's against the teachings of our tradition. When one avenue that was a legitimate and easy form of protest becomes too dangerous, you have to stop doing it and change tactics and move to the next opportunity. Nobody will change this world if you die trying to do it.

I want to give you a couple of things you might want to get involved with. And I'm sharing these two because they have not been announced. So first, I would encourage you to resist and support those individuals and organizations who resist. I want to highlight The Washington National Opera in particular. They recently announced that they left the Trump Kennedy Center, which has been their home since the early 1970s. Now you may be one of the people who is still trying to decide if you should keep your subscriptions or continue to go to the performances because you believe in the artists,

you believe in the mission, you want it to be there afterwards. And those are all good and worthy dynamics. The National Opera didn't cite Trump or the name change directly as their reason and the administration claims it kicked the opera out rather than the opera leaving. Put that aside for now. But one of the things that makes it hard to stand up against this administration is the threat or reality of financial loss and the impact on every day people – which is not what you intend or what they want – the musicians, staffers, crew. I think boycotts can be powerful tools and have an impact. Look at the Montgomery Bus Boycott and The Boycott South Africa movements. But we can't just cut people off or cancel them especially in cases where their stakeholders and employees are not to blame or where the stakeholders find themselves. The Opera and other institutions that make moves like this are open now to our support. And it's important because art matters in moments like this. It has always been critical to protests, revolutions, and change. So, we are partnering with the Washington

National Opera. Their tickets literally just went on sale today, which will be conducted outside the Kennedy Center for the first time, for their first two performances are at the Lisner Auditorium. Now maybe the opera is outside your comfort zone and it's going to be inconvenient for you. But we have a block of 20 tickets that available, they are \$115 each, the face value of the tickets, we've already given the tickets to the opera, for their performance of Scott Joplin's operate Tremoneesha on Sun, March 8th at 2pm. Helena Goldstein is here, thank you, to help with signups and Elizabeth who helped to organize this with me as well. The tickets are first come first serve. After the service she's going to be right out there in the lobby where the tzedakah box is, you can sign up to get these tickets, we'll work out payment from you later, but it's going to be first come, first serve, and we're going to do more of these. We're also talking with the opera, not yet arranged, to find ways to host them here at Temple Sinai. Among the things they have announced are a couple of performances that they will be performing, small ensembles

with some of their musicians at churches around town; and we would be honored to be part of that. And we are starting to make those plans and we'll work those out.

Jews Against Ice – I also want to tell you about an event Wednesday Feb. 11th, 1:30-2:30 PM near ICE HQ in Washington, DC. We have just signed on to be a co-sponsor of a program called Jews against ICE. And I'm not talking about what's coming this weekend, although we're not totally in favor of that either. The Jews against ICE rally is Wednesday, February 11 from 1:30 – 2:30 pm right near the ICE headquarters downtown Washington. It's organized by Truah and Bend the Arc with several other organizations co-sponsoring, including Temple Sinai. This is a national action with clergy and others coming in from across the country. But we are here so it's much less inconvenient for us and we can and we will show up in person. Glenn and Hannah are already committed to attending. We'll be sending out notifications about it as well.

Go to that Davis Center site, volunteer at Some or a Wider Circle. Even if it feels like a small little thing it will have an impact you won't even know. And get involved at WIN, CAN, TRUAH and BEND THE ARC.

You have been asking What can you do?

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You can do a lot. You can save the world. Now it's up to you. You gotta get the you know what out there and go do it. Shabbat shalom.