

Dvar for Boston Workers' Circle Yom Kippur 5779
Haley Kossek
September 19, 2018

Leshone Toyve. My name is Haley and I am honored to be speaking with you today. I have been part of our community for four years. I work as a labor union organizer and am inspired to act as part of our community in the tradition of secular socialist Jewish forebears like Clara Lemlich, Karl Marx, and Rosa Luxembourgh. Today I am talking on the theme of how we act on our vision, and about atonement and teshuva. I am fasting today, as I have for the past several years, to the surprise of people around me because I didn't grow up doing so. I began fasting only as a secular young adult, drawn towards the concept of atonement because of its link with the Marxist practice of comradesly criticism and self-criticism. Revolutionaries have long held onto the idea that individuals' oppressive tendencies can be transformed through collective effort, and that doing so prepares us to contend against injustice with unified strength. That idea would have been commonplace at a Communist Party meeting on the Lower East Side in the 1930s, but it's also not difficult to locate in the ancient Al Chet confession of sins on Yom Kippur. That prayer is striking to me because its phrasing is purely collective: WE atone for the sins which WE have committed before you. There is no individualism. So long as anyone has committed acts of disrespect or mistreatment, all are bound to make amends.

I had that idea on my mind during the high holidays last year, when I was deep in the thick of organizing towards a strike vote amongst 350 dining hall workers at Northeastern University. Inspired by the workers at Harvard who had led a historic strike the year before, Northeastern workers were demanding that their employer pay a minimum income of at least \$35,000 per year. That number came from a 2016 study that found that was the minimum necessary for someone to make ends meet living in the Boston area. It also happened to amount to .000001% of Harvard's \$35 billion endowment. So when cooks and dishwashers linked arms and walked off their jobs, forgoing their paychecks for 22 days in pursuit of a livable income, nobody doubted that Harvard had the means to meet their demands. The issue was whether the university had the will to do so. Our union president took to repeating a popular message over the bullhorn. He would say, "We are going to help Harvard to find its moral compass." And you know, I think that's such a heartwarming image. To think, here we were, three weeks into a militant work stoppage. The dining hall workers were walking picket lines from dawn to dusk, prompting international headlines and mass student walkouts, and it turns out that at the end of the day, they were doing a mitzvah not only for each other or for Boston's working class as a whole, but on behalf the boss who they were on strike against.

I'm proud to report that since last Yom Kippur, Northeastern dining hall workers have won their minimum income, and since then, thousands more union members have helped their employers to atone for the wrongdoing of underpaying workers by organizing and voting to strike in the model set by the Harvard workers. Most recently, almost 2,000 Marriott hotel workers in Boston have voted to authorize a strike at the largest and richest hotel chain in the world, and members of our community should be on alert for how to show solidarity with them as they prepare to walk out on strike at any point in the next two weeks. And today, as we turn inward to reflect on our actions towards others and how we may turn to meet the mark in our interpersonal relationships in the coming year, I encourage us to also reflect on what we need to do to bring about atonement from employers, owners, and decision makers who are responsible for endless war, climate crisis, and police violence. Past struggles show that real atonement for social injustice requires material change: reparations, land reform, and the redistribution of wealth. After the 1950 Chinese land reform law brought land ownership to 300 million peasants after millennia of feudalism, peasants organized "Speak Bitterness" sessions throughout the countryside, calling their former landlords into the public square to describe the suffering they had experienced at their hands.

Speak Bitterness became the inspiration for the first consciousness-raising sessions of the 1970s U.S. women's liberation movement, and was later described as “the first known attempt to convert women's private laments [about subjects like rape and domestic violence] into public acts.”

The point for me is not actually that efforts like these lead exploitative institutions to find their moral compass because I don't think that such a thing exists. But the message of the Al Chet is that atonement is only possible as a collective process. Individual union-busting employers might not emerge from a strike with a newfound conscience, but they emerge with newfound obligations to the people they employ, whether they like it or not. On a society-wide level, humans can arrange power and wealth to reckon with the brutal oppression of the past and turn onto the right path going forward, and we can make oppressive institutions come along with us. So now this brings me to a personal story.

In April of this year, I visited Poland on a trip organized by the national Workers' Circle to mark the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. My father came on the trip with me, and while we were there, we travelled with two other BWC members to the small town of Chrzanow, the former home of my Bubbe, my dad's mom and my grandmother. She lived there from birth until the date of her 20th birthday, when the Nazis liquidated the Jewish ghetto and deported her and her family to concentration camps. My Bubbe and Zayde were each the only person in their families to survive the Holocaust. They met and married in a displaced persons camp in Italy and then immigrated to the United States in 1949. They only ever returned to Poland once, in 1992, a year after I was born. And they did it because they wanted to see the places that they had once been from, because they had never had the chance to say goodbye. My dad came on that trip with them. He describes arriving in the center of my Zayde's hometown outside of Warsaw, and my Zayde immediately remembering the way to walk towards the house where he grew up, as if it had been only a day and not fifty years since he had last walked there. So my Dad, Bubbe, and Zayde find their way to Zayde's boyhood home, and, standing in front of the yard, Zayde sees that the tree he had planted as a small boy has now grown to be many feet tall. As he and Bubbe and dad take in the intensity of what they're beholding, they notice the house's current residents angrily staring and pointing at them from the front window. Those residents think that my family have returned to claim their historical property and displace them from their home. They furiously close the curtains and lock the front door. As my family members anxiously hurry away, they notice anti-Semitic graffiti lining the streets of Zayde's hometown, a place where zero Jews have lived since 1943.

This was the experience that prepared my dad and I for what to expect when we visited my Bubbe's hometown this past April. This time, my grandparents weren't there to guide us in person, having both passed away in recent years. Without any written address, we could only go off of a faded photograph of Bubbe standing in front of her building taken from the trip in 1992. We doubted we would be able to re-locate it, but still, I said to dad, let's go to Chrzanow anyways, just to be there. Even if we can't find Bubbe's home, it will mean something to me have set foot in the place where she once walked as a teenager.

So we arrive in the Chrzanow town square, the same one where my Bubbe and her sister and parents had stood in lines 75 years earlier waiting to be sorted into groups for deportation. We rendezvous with the local guide who our BWC counterparts Harry and Judy had carefully found through internet research. Our guide's name is Kamil. He is a native son of Chrzanow, a city councilor from a Catholic family who have lived there for 500 years. In 2017, a local property owner wanted to remove the town's Holocaust memorial and Kamil used his role on the city council to keep the memorial from being taken down. Now, he is one of those courageous people in small-town Poland who have taken on the commitment of preserving Jewish memory in places where it would otherwise be erased. He greets

our group wearing a full suit and tie and bearing armfuls of gifts of Chrzanow town memorabilia. He asks us if we want to see the Jewish cemetery, or the site of the former synagogue, and we say, yes, we would love to see those things, but what we would really love is to find my Bubbe's former home if he can help us get there. We show him the faded old photograph, expressing regret that we don't have a written address, and he stares at the picture for thirty seconds and says, oh yes, of course, that's on al-Henryka Street. Just like that. He starts walking us there and suddenly my dad and I are face to face with the apartment building where my grandma lived before the Nazis destroyed the world of Jewish Poland. We walk into the backyard where we imagine that Bubbe must have once played outside as a little girl. Two women are sitting on a bench in the backyard, speaking Polish and clearly staring at us, and I sense my dad tensing up with the memory of the reception he had received twenty-six years ago.

The women approach us and speak to our guide Kamil in Polish, and he begins to translate. He tells us that they came to ask if we're Jews and if our families used to live here. We hesitantly answer yes and then these two women, whose names I learn are Yachsha and Anna, begin crying, hugging and kissing me, telling us: oh, what a blessing it is that you are here, this is your home, you belong here. They ask if we know which apartment number had been our grandma's, if we want to see it. They say: any time you come to Chrzanow you have a place to stay with us.

Then later that day, I see an English-language bumper sticker on a public trash can, celebrating the controversial recent law criminalizing claims that the Polish nation shared in any culpability for the crimes of the Nazi Holocaust.

Thinking back, I am moved by the warmth and connection that Yachsha and Anna unhesitantly showed towards a group of strange tourists in their backyard. I am honored by city councilor Kamil and his efforts as a last line of defense for Jewish memory. And, I felt deep terror and rage walking down the street in a place where Jews had once made up 53% of the city and now make up 0%, and where for 75 years, a non-Jewish family has occupied the home that my grandma was expelled from. How can any amount of goodwill or compassionate reflection ever confront that reality of genocide? What could ever set things right in Chrzanow? What can make things ok in Massachusetts, where smallpox blankets were used as biological warfare used against indigenous people? What could any amount of atonement ever offer on top of the ruins of Palestinian villages destroyed in the Nakba?

If atonement is just personal reflection, then I worry that the answer to those questions will remain unfulfilling. But if bringing about collective atonement means speaking bitterness to be able to recall unjust power and then struggle towards reparation in all of its dimensions, then our efforts this new year can position us not just to turn to better meet the mark going forward but to go back to the roots of what set us in the wrong direction to begin with. The words to the old labor song say that we can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old, for our Union makes us strong. So let us fortify ourselves and our organization, commit to each other and our brothers and sisters and siblings who share common stakes and common values. Let us build unity that is powerful enough to be able to win justice. Another world is possible and a new year is upon us; and it is through our collective power and effort that a new year can bring about a new world.

L'Shana Tova.