

Do you know the fun significance of March 14 every year? Yup...it's Pi Day. 3/14, March 14, 3.14...159265359. What a great day to extol the virtues of cherry and peach while looking down upon those who suggest rhubarb or key lime...and then trying to sneak a piece of all of them. I'll admit to being a pie opportunist.

What about May 4? Yeah, I can see some smiles in this room. May the 4th. Star Wars Day. May the forth be with you.

This one is hard. Do you know the significance of September 13? It is the 256th day of the year, the number of possible values in a byte, making this Programmer Day. Thank your family coder for making the technological world work and introducing us to AI...and for the tech support they provide you when you have a silly question.

And my favorite. July 1. Any sports fans recognize this date? July 1 is colloquially known as Bobby Bonilla day. Yes, the same Bobby Bonilla who played third base, terribly, and then right field for the Pirates from 1987-1991, making the All-Star team four years in a row. He left for the Mets in 1992 on what was then Major League Baseball's biggest contract, though it didn't work out so well for the Mets. Diminishing offensive performance, a couple of trades, and eventually the Mets agreed to buy out the remaining \$5.9 million dollars of his contract rather than have him take the field again in a Mets uniform. Nothing remarkable about this, it happens all.the.time in the sports world. But not everyone is represented by Dennis Gilbert, a good Jewish boy from Los Angeles.

Bonilla's agent, Gilbert offered the Mets an intriguing proposition. Instead of paying Bonilla the contractually obligated \$5.9 million dollars in 1999, Gilbert said, why don't you let that money grow for a while — you're making great money with Bernie Madoff (not a great Jewish boy from New York) — you can just pay my client later, he said. The Mets agreed...and are now on the hook to pay Bobby Bonilla 1.2 million dollars every July 1 until he is 72 years old.¹ It's an

¹ Learn more about Bobby Bonilla Day here: https://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/31732959/bobby-bonilla-day-explained-why-mets-pay-119m-today-every-july-1

amazing deal — for Bonilla — and his agent Dennis Gilbert explained his genius as follows: “You know, I had a lot of friends that were coming out of the game of baseball, and they were running out of money. I was trying to think of what I could do and was thinking of some ideas of how to go about it, and this is what I came up with.”² Bonilla, like many in professional sports, had a great agent, someone looking out for his interests and working thoughtfully and strategically for his future, and it paid off. Literally. Until 34 years after Bonilla will have last touched a Major League baseball.

A recent billboard campaign by the organization Pass It On, a non-partisan, a-religious non-profit that publicizes “values [they] hope most individuals would find encouraging and relevant...in an effort to encourage people to bring out the best in themselves,”³ pointed out that its not only sports stars that need agents to act on their behalf, to take an active role to produce a better future. Even Mother Nature has an agent, their billboard proclaims, and necessarily so. Dr. Jane Goodall became the world’s foremost expert on chimpanzees...and conservation, and animal welfare; along the way teaching us as much about ourselves as about the world in which we live. “Chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans have been living for hundreds of thousands of years in their forest, living fantastic lives, never overpopulating, never destroying the forest. I would say that they have been in a way more successful than us as far as being in harmony with the environment,” she said.⁴ Dr. Goodall has received copious recognition for her role as Mother Nature’s agent — United Nations Messenger of Peace, the Stephen Hawking Medal for Science Communication, numerous national awards — and has inspired countless members of subsequent generations with the tenancy of her hope.⁵ Let’s add April 22, Earth Day, to the days we are recognizing this evening.

² Interview with Dennis Gilbert: <https://www.foxsports.com/stories/mlb/bobby-bonilla-day-mets-dennis-gilbert-mlb-ben-verlander>

³ <https://www.passiton.com/who-we-are>

⁴ Interview with Virginia Morell: <https://www.discovermagazine.com/planet-earth/the-discover-interview-jane-goodall>

⁵ <https://time.com/6102640/jane-goodall-environment-hope/>

What I love about Pass It On's billboard campaign is that it simultaneously applauds the good that Goodall has done in this world while inspiring each of us to think about our role. Dennis Gilbert served as Bobby Bonilla's agent and did a phenomenal job. Jane Goodall serves as Mother Nature's agent and does amazing work. Calling attention to their efforts isn't to inspire you to go out and get an agent — though props to you if you are so successful as to need one — but to yourself *be* an agent, for I think this is the hidden message of Yom Kippur.

Hidden, because our personal preparations and thoughts on this day are often **inwardly**-focused. *Kol Nidre*, we say: please nullify and forgive the vows that *I* am unable to keep. We ask forgiveness from those we have wronged, and search inside ourselves for the strength to grant forgiveness if in the position to do so, as ***personal*** improvement. It's easy on Yom Kippur to think that we should be narrowly focused on ourselves — on what have we done wrong and how can we fix it — because, in large part, we should be. And...it's also important that we don't miss the forest for the me, myself, and I tree. Our entire liturgy, tonight and tomorrow, is actually about our responsibility to the collective:

- When we recite our litany of confession, *Al Cheit Shechetanu*, we proclaim not that *I* have sinned but that *we* have missed the mark. As Rabbi David Teutsch writes, this list is an “emphatic statement of behaviors the community considers unacceptable, proclaims [ing] its expectations to its members,”⁶ which we all have an obligation to uphold. Though *I* may not have done all of these things in the past year — hopefully no one here did **all** of these things in the past year, but if you have I suppose you are in the right place — we live in a society where people have and we all share in the collective responsibility.
- When we take ownership of our shortcomings we ask that “*u'teshuvah, u't'filah, u'tzedakah ma'avirin et roa ha'g'zeirah* — through repentance, prayer, and tzedakah we can transcend the path we are on.” Repentance and prayer may be centered on me as

⁶ We Have Sinned, edited by Lawrence Hoffman; pages 134-138.

an individual, but *tzedakah* is about my responsibility within the collective.

- The Torah portion we will read tomorrow, that Dr. Ben Handen will read tomorrow, enumerates what the Israelites — what we — must do to be holy as God is holy. Leave the corners of your fields and the gleanings for those disadvantaged by society; do not steal, deceive, or lie to your fellow human beings; do not judge others with prejudice: each of these commandments speaks of our responsibility to others.

In our confession, our prayers, and our learning on this most sacred day of the year, we aren't asking for God to serve as our agent, to act on behalf of me, me, me; we are reminding ourselves that we must be the agents acting for others to be ourselves worthy of God's attention. We don't pray that we each retain agents like Dennis Gilbert or Jane Goodall; on Yom Kippur we ask that we can all **be** agents like Dennis Gilbert or Jane Goodall, acting for the interests of others.

It begs the specific question: For whom will you serve as an agent in the year 5784?

Who needs your help, and whom are you best suited to serve?

Are you following in Dr. Goodall's footsteps, concerned about the state of the environment in which we live? Are you concerned about food insecurity or housing insecurity or economic justice in the South Hills, Allegheny County, the United States, or around the world? Have life circumstances led you to prioritize detection, research, or treatment of a specific disease, cancer, or condition impacting the human experience? Do you volunteer with and advocate for youth as a tutor or mentor, improving their educational outlook? Is caring for animals and the prevention of cruelty toward them something that gets you out of bed in the morning? Are you the primary caregiver for a loved-one, acting always in their best interest despite the personal toll this labor of love can take? Are you a supporter of the arts and the development of culture? Are you primarily concerned with supporting refugees and immigrants to this country as they learn English and attempt to navigate the healthcare, education, and

employment systems? Are you troubled by gun violence and ready to take a stand? This list could go on forever as there is only one wrong answer.

Before rabbinical school, I had the pleasure of advising a Jewish youth group and teaching in a Sunday School and Hebrew school in Columbus, Ohio. When my class of students were polled about where to donate their collected *tzedakah*, their righteousness expressed in this case through giving, the Humane Society and organizations assisting animals didn't only make the **top** of the list, they were the only organizations **on** the list. Like at the Mitzvah Mall here at Temple, no one could resist the cute, cuddly pull of animals. As I was kvetching to a colleague about this generation's priorities and lack of sympathy for humanity, she laughed at my hubris and pointed out how fortunate we were to live in a world where everyone can serve as an agent for those they know to be in need according to their position and their passion. I have my priorities, she said, and you have yours... and the needs in our families and communities and society are too great and too diverse to judge for whom others will advocate. The only answer that doesn't work, I believe Yom Kippur tells us, is to not have — and then act upon — an answer to this question:

For whom will you serve as an agent in the year 5784?

While the benefits to acting as an agent for others you care about, looking out for their interests and working thoughtfully and strategically for their future, may have been a bit more tangible for Dennis Gilbert, they are a bit more durable for us. Acting in the interests of others gives purpose and meaning to our lives while improving our physical and mental health.⁷ Serving as another's agent has even been shown to increase our happiness more than having additional dollars in our pocket.⁸ It changes our relationships with our community, our spending habits and priorities, our actions in the voting booth, and so much more. It even, as Yom Kippur tells us, is

⁷ <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/3-health-benefits-of-volunteering>

⁸ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_volunteering_can_help_your_mental_health

the basis for God upholding God's end of the covenant with the Jewish people.⁹ In our confession, our prayers, and our learning on this most sacred day of the year, we are reminded of the community forest in addition to the me, me, me tree. Our responsibility to the collective, our ability and willingness to act as agents on others' behalves is that which draws us closer to God as we begin the year 5784.

April 22: Earth Day. Jane Goodall serves as Mother Nature's agent and does amazing work. July 1: Bobby Bonilla Day. Dennis Gilbert served as Bobby Bonilla's agent and did a phenomenal job.

Calling attention to their efforts isn't to inspire you to go out and get an agent but to yourself *be* an agent. Acting in the interests of others to save ourselves is the hidden message of Yom Kippur.

So.

For whom will you serve as an agent in the year 5784? There's only one wrong answer to that question.

⁹ Deuteronomy 26:12-15