

HAZAN ET HA-KOL – SUSTAINING LIFE: WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TODAY

*Yom Kippur 5770 — Monday, September 28, 2009
Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas
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Many of you are familiar with this story but I'd like to take a moment to refresh your memory. It was January 2007, the Washington Post got Joshua Bell—a 39-year-old violin virtuoso—to play for free for an hour at a metro station. Normally, if you want to hear Joshua Bell play, you go to a place like the Kennedy Center and pay at least \$100 a seat. That day Joshua Bell played for free. He wore a T-shirt and black baseball hat, and he left the open case to his \$3.5 million Stradivarius at his feet for donations.

That morning, exactly 7 people out of more than 1,000 stopped and they gave about \$32.17 to hear one of the world's great violinists play for free. In their rush to work they had no idea what they were missing.

It is easy to rationalize what happened. It was the morning rush; people were on their way to work and in a hurry. I can't say I would have stopped to listen either. But the point is when we are busy and focusing on our lives, it can be hard if not impossible to stop and hear or see the beauty around us.

And I am guessing that for many of you life is lived at the frantic pace of the morning commute. You go from one thing to the next, with kids to get up and out the door, the drive to work and the drive home, soccer, keshet, homework, walk the dog, dinner, bedtime, and do it all over again. I know that this is certainly reflective of my life!

But I worry, if we are so rushed we can't stop to take in the magic of the world, like Joshua Bell playing his Stradivarius, then how in the world are we going to pay attention to the estimated 1 billion hungry people in the world?

Over 10 million children younger than five each year die around the globe mostly from malnutrition and related health problems. That's an overwhelming number, too big to even think about...so let's get real and look to our own country. This is a Basic Hunger Fact Food insecurity has been described as: "the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the acquisition of acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways."¹ Given this definition, it is estimated that 1 in 10 households in America goes hungry or is threatened by the possibility of hunger.² In Los Angeles 1 million people are hungry... But perhaps even that is too big to comprehend and it's not our community...so let's look closer to home...Kansas ranks 4th in the nation for food insecurity and Missouri 6th...need to bring it down even more? 60,000 people every week receive food from harvesters, 1 in 5 children goes to bed hungry every night right in our own back yard.

How many times have we driven by the guy with the sign on the highway, you know the one that begs for change or a sandwich?

One of my rabbis teaches that the calls of the shofar are the cries of the suffering. The sounds are not a performance for us to applaud, rather they are a call to action - the teruah (brief whimpering cries), the shevarim (groaning cries of medium length), and the tekia (long clear cries). Each cry represents a different kind of suffering in the world that we are called to internalize: the intermittent sob of those afflicted with physical and mental suffering; the groan of an oppressed laborer in a factory or a field; and the plaintive keening of one entrenched in the deepest form of poverty-hunger in this land of plenty.

We listen to the voice of the shofar blast 100 times on Rosh Hashanah to break through, even shatter, our spiritual obstinacy. With that final long cry at the conclusion of Yom Kippur...the sound reverberating through our parched bodies reminding us that It is our call to responsibility...to always look about and pay attention, not pass by at that frenetic pace that we miss the sound...we must hear the cries in our community.

On these holiest of days we read the haunting words of the Unetaneh tokef: "Mi yichyeh, u'mi yamut": "Who will live and who will die." As we start to read that rhythmic inventory of life and death, We begin to see snippets of the newspaper in our minds eye: deaths timely and tragic, natural and unnatural disasters, war, famine and plague. There are so many things that we are powerless to do anything about, and then boom-Right in the middle of the list, two phrases jump out "Mi bara'av, u'mi batzama" — "who from hunger, and who from thirst." These are things that on which we can have an

impact.....These words ruminate in our heads and our hearts...and then they come together with the words of our Haftarah....

"This is the fast I desire...To let the oppressed go free; to share your bread with the hungry..." Is this why we are here today???

So many of us struggle with this day...are we here out of guilt, our of tradition, does this day have meaning for us? Who will we be when we exit the sanctuary at the conclusion of our day? Will we have been affected by the prayers, by the sermon, by the fast...or will we have simply punched the proverbial religious time clock?

These Yamei Teshuvah are powerful, if we let them, they are about turning noticing...looking inwardly in order to better engage outwardly.....this fast can only work if it indeed impacts us for the better.

Rabbi Sam Stall, Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Beth El of San Antonio taught that the purpose of the fast was three fold: When we are famished, we understand hunger. God, Torah, our tradition teach us that there is a direct link between food and compassion. we are to feed our animals before we feed ourselves, because it is only when we are hungry are we able to have compassion for beings who are in need sustenance.

Our prayer of thanks to God for our food comes after we eat, gratitude for what we personally have received, but We recite HaMotzi prior to eating as a means to better comprehend the human divine connection when it comes to

feeding the hungry. We say praised are You...who brings forth bread from the earth. And yet God does not bring bread...God provides the elements and the conditions for growth, it is through human partnership...the labors the planting, harvesting and production that bread mazon sustance becomes maifest. Hence sustance is a human-divine partnership, one to be shared with all in this world. When there is hunger in our community, it is a breakdown in that human-Divine relationship.

That requires of us action- There is hunger in our world and we have to do something about it. Our community is in trouble-we have children whose only meals come from school, seniors who are forced to choose between paying for heat or paying for food, parents who are going with less food so their children can have more.

“This is the fast I desire...To let the oppressed go free; to share your bread with the hungry...”

- Isaiah 57:14-58:14

Every day, people go hungry, even though there is more than enough food to go around. During Yom Kippur, we must put our fast in perspective and take meaningful action for those for whom fasting is not a voluntary act.

There is a prayer in our Holy Day Mahzor that reads, To be a Jew is to be holy, to be holy means that in the face of the many we stand for the one; in the presence of fragments to make them whole. To hold fast to our vision of truth, to retain our faith in tomorrow and to bear witness to the goodness of life.

I understand this to mean: to be a Jew is to be holy. The Torah instructs us, that we are to be an Am Kedusha, a holy people.

The visual reminder of this was the Kohen Gadol, who wore on the band of his head garment the words Kadosh L'Adonai, Holy to God, to remind us that each one of us is unique and sacred and in relationship with God.

To be holy means that in the face of the many we stand for the one:

So let us now extend the metaphor, we believe that all of humanity came from one common ancestor, Adam who was created B'tzelem Eloheim, in the divine Image of God, who was infused with the breath of life by God and who by its very nature encompasses all creation and is endowed with infinite value. To be Holy is to embodied with the Divine and thus to respect all human creation through our actions in respect to their divine nature. Hence, amid the turmoil and chaos of the multitude, we must seek the humanity in every individual human being. We must be listening to hear the individual cry for help and to stand up for that voice within the whirlwind of society.

In the presence of fragments to make them whole, we are called upon by God to engage in a partnership of Tikkun, repair of our world. To seek out the holy fragments and bring them together to create a world of shemut, of wholeness, of completeness. To hold fast to our vision of truth, through our actions to bring Tzedek, justice and Hesed, compassion to this world.

The prophets call out to us, beseeching that we stand up for the poor, the widow, the orphan. They remind us that if we do not feed the hungry that our communities will unravel and fall to destruction. It is in our common interest that we build societies where every human being has the basic necessities of life. Assuring every person the dignity that comes with a full belly is a religious imperative. For if we believe that God, the God to whom we pray to judge us kindly and to exonerate us of our hatayim our transgressions, created one person at the dawn of creation, and that all people are endowed with immeasurable dignity, then you can not turn away from this injustice in our community.

We read repeatedly in our Holy Day liturgy that it is through T'shuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah, the three-fold action of our repentance that the character of our lives can be radically changed.

We are here together as a community engaging in prayer, we are collectively making a reckoning of our lives, to see where we need to make amends, what we need to add to this equation is the recommitment to Tzedek, to righteousness and justice because it is what God requires of us.

We learn in the Talmud, that we are forbidden to pray in a room without windows. For when we pray we are to hear the world's weeping, we are to see the hungry huddled at the Temple's gate. Rabbi Akiva declared study and prayer to be the mission of Judasim only if it leads to action. For prayer and study sensitize us to our role in the world.

No one person can save the community, but together we can make a great impact. Abraham Joshua Heschel said as he marched in Selma, I felt my legs were praying...

I read somewhere the following statement: Food banks are critical band-aids to stop the bleeding of hunger. However by saying that we can end hunger by giving out cans is like saying we can fill the grand canyon by using a teaspoon. It is an enormous endeavour for which we need a much bigger tool.

What do I want from you this High Holiday season? We must raise our voices a demand that no one go hungry. We must hear and act upon the the voices of the prophets... But to do so, we must be informed- I challenge each and every member of this sacred congregation to educate yourself, to become part of the solution...to become an advocate against hunger.

I have placed at the entrances to our building an action sheet, with web site addresses to local organizations that I am personally familiar with and which the Reform movement is involved.. I encourage you to become better informed. And then decided out how you want to take action.

The Talmud comments, "Every act of tzedek and chesed, justice and righteousness that Israel performs creates peace and increases our merit with God"

The current economic recession is testing our community and our families. Applications for food stamps and food bank usage are on the rise. Unemployment is up. Many of us have

tightened our belts about as tight as they can go....but the need to come together to address hunger in our community has never been greater.

As it says in Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:11, "For the poor shall never cease out of the land; therefore I command thee, saying: 'Thou shalt surely open thy hand unto thy poor and needy brother, in thy land.'" It is essential to educate young members of the Jewish Community about the realities of hunger in order to dispel the many misconceptions and stereotypes about it.

By giving tzedakah, by working for policies that will create opportunity for everyone, and by helping to create a more just society, we can make the divine presence evident among us, and lift ourselves collectively out of the Depths of dispare.

We are a congregation of over 1,000 households. If just 1 person from each home dedicated time toward advocacy, sweat equity hours helping to eradicate hunger in our community. What if just 1 person from each family volunteered to work at one of our two soup kitchens just once this year. What if 1 person from each family became an active member of our Social Justice committee and helped to create anti-hunger programming for our congregation and community or helped to spearhead a backpack afterschool food project, or came to cook soup for mitvah food project. What if every child in our congregation agreed to contribute 18 cans of tune over the coming year? Imagine the impact that we can make as a congregation? I challenge every individual in this congregation to take action and commit to one anti-hunger

activity this year. Send me an e-mail or drop me a note...tell me what you will personally commit to do between now and Mitzvah Day in May. The ideas and projects will go into our virtual Sukkah on our Temple web-site. Let's see the impact that we can make. There is so much that we can do, and we need every single member of this sacred community to act. We can not wait.....we are all in this together.

No person is so poor that they can not do something. As we are taught, our dignity comes through the actions that we perform. Even one who is himself supported by tzedaka, must give tzedaka. A person who can only give a little should not hesitate to give, because a little from him is like a great deal from a wealthier person.

Just as we read in the Aleynu prayer: Eternal God, we face the morrow with hope made stronger by the vision of Your deliverance, a world where poverty, hunger and fear are banished. Teach us to respond to the pain of others, to heed your call for tzedek, for righteousness, that we may bring nearer the day when the entire world shall be one.

God, may it be Your will that one day we live in a world perfected, in which food comes to the hungry as from heaven, and water will flow to the thirsty as a stream.

But in the meantime, while our community is filled with hunger, empower us to stand on Your behalf and fulfill the words of Your prophet: "to all who are thirsty bring water," and "greet those who wander with food."

May this Yom Kippur fast, embolden us to action, may we through our prayers renew ourselves to hear God's commission, that we as an Am Kedusha ,by our lives and our labors bring nearer to realization the hope for a world transformed.

Kayn Yehi Ratzon