

The Responsibilities of Living a Life of Abundance

This past summer, after spending a wonderful month at Camp Ramah in the Berkshires with my family, I came home to return to work, leaving Jane-Rachel working and the kids playing at camp.

As sad as I was to spend my nights alone in a quiet house, I ended up with much more free time than usual after my work day was finished, and I had a plan! I was excited to spend all of my free time cleaning, sorting, donating, and organizing our house. I knew that during the busy school year, we accumulated stuff that we now no longer needed or wanted, and I was thrilled to have this quiet time to clean up, organize, and donate. (Don't worry, sisterhood members, I set aside plenty for the rummage sale!)

I started in our basement, and was astonished that after only a few nights I had gathered five huge black bags filled with toys that our kids no longer used or needed. But what was even more astonishing was the fact that even after collecting all of this, the basement was still full- with toys, legos, games, art supplies, DVD's -- anything and everything a child could ever need to play with. How did we accumulate quite so much? And this was just the basement!!

Although of course this should have been obvious all along, it took some hours of really stepping back and taking stock to remind me of something

very important. Many of us simply love to collect things, to buy things, to have and to own things. In truth, most of us are blessed with more than we ever could need in our lives. We are blessed with an abundance of material possessions, an abundance of money, and an abundance of food. And while I am certain that we have people in our community who are struggling financially- my sense is that the vast majority of us in this room have far more than "enough." Indeed, most of us could probably live out our lives with much less.

A few years ago I read a little book entitled *The Power of Half: One Family's Decision To Stop Taking And Start Giving Back*. The book was a story about a fourteen year old girl who had a bit of an epiphany after seeing a homeless man in her neighborhood while simultaneously spotting someone driving a luxury car. She challenged her parents, and made the case that they simply did not need to live in the size house that they owned, or have as much as they did in general. With the willful determination and persistence of a teenager, she convinced her parents to sell their Atlanta mansion, to get rid of many of their possessions, and to donate the proceeds to an organization that fights hunger in Africa. The family decided to literally downsize their home to one that was half as expensive and half as big, and ultimately donated \$850,000. And the most powerful part of this story is what they learned from their downsizing, from trading in their huge house for a very nice and big house, from giving away half of their possessions, and swapping

their luxury cars for cars that cost half as much. Where did they land? With plenty to live a very full and very comfortable life.

While this example may seem extreme, the book highlights the fact that many of us could live without much of what we have when it comes to our material wealth. Many of us could stand to "give more," and "take or have less." From the food that gets wasted from our weekly grocery shopping, to the tech gadgets that we use but quickly get bored with, to the kitchen appliances that we rarely take out, to the bags, shoes, and clothes that are worn or used a few times before we lose interest, to the books that are read once and then just piled on the shelf, to the toys that are ignored once the next and better toy comes around. Many of us, who are blessed to have so much, don't even know what to do with it all.

And, as the expression goes, we certainly cannot take any of it with us. If there is one thing that Yom Kippur reminds us of, it is that we are mortal. Our possessions should not be what defines us in this world. *How we live*, not what we own- is what should define us. As we say in every house of mourning, at the end of the shiva service.

"Do not be in awe of a person who is wealthy or when the honor of that person's house grows great. Because when such a person dies, he will not take his possessions with him...." Psalms 49:17-18

And yet we collect, we gather, we love to own more and more things.

Perhaps some of us, collectively living in the shadow of ancestors who came

over from Eastern Europe with very little, have a subconscious desire to make sure that we have enough- enough clothes, enough money, and of course- enough food. But in truth, most of us are, in the words of the Psalmist, like:

A person walking around like a shadow, our efforts adding up to so little. We pile up possessions, but don't know who will gather them up... Psalms 39: 7

We collect, just to collect. And in this respect- *Ashamnu*. We are guilty.

We are guilty of overemphasizing the material. We are guilty of hoarding stuff. We are guilty of having so much while other people have so little.

And we are obligated to do something about it.

I know we all may wonder to ourselves: *I earned what I have. I worked hard for those things. Why shouldn't I have them? Why shouldn't I buy what I want, enjoy having lots of stuff? Or why should I give any of it away?*

Because that's what our tradition asks of us. Because our world, our country, our state, and even our community is filled with needy people, people who are truly struggling. And ours is a long tradition that reminds us daily to care for "those people." Ours is a tradition that constantly reminds us to care for the poor, the widow, the stranger, the orphan, the hungry.

Our is a tradition that began with a question: *Am I my brother's keeper?*, and quickly concluded that the answer is, always, a resounding yes.

Just listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah that we will recite in our Haftorah tomorrow morning.

Is such the fast I desire, a day for man to starve their bodies?
Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Do you call that a fast? A day when the Lord is favorable?!

No, this is the fast I desire.....

To share your bread with the hungry, And take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin....

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn and your healing spring up quickly....

Then when you call, the Lord will answer; When you cry God will say: *Hineni*, Here I am. **Isaiah 58:5-9**

When we gather on Yom Kippur, hungry and tired- Isaiah comes to remind us that as bad as we may feel in this moment, there are many who are *always* hungry and tired. On Yom Kippur, a day spent focused on the emotional and spiritual and not the material, we are asked to recognize that things, belongings, stuff are in many senses "immaterial." The material abundance that most of us are blessed with is, in the end of the day, just not all that important.

We are not ascetic as Jews. We do not deny the value in owning material items, in enjoying our food, our homes, a comfortable lifestyle. But as Jews the choices we make about our money and our belongings and our bounty are what is most important. It is whether or not we *share* our bread, our bounty, our blessings with others. That is what Isaiah teaches us.

Please don't mishear me. This is not meant to make anyone feel guilty for enjoying life. But on this day of reflection and introspection, we must take a step back to examine our lives, our choices, our possessions, and realize that we have so much, almost certainly too much. And with this realization, we must remember those who have so little and figure out what we can do to address this disparity.

There are two basic principles that inform Jewish religious attitudes towards wealth:

The first: "ultimately all wealth belongs to God, [and] what we own is a loan from God . . . In this view, God deposits God's wealth with human beings as a trust. If the trustee manages God's "deposit" properly, then God's capital is well used. If not, the human trustee is liable for misappropriation of funds, even for robbery.

The second principle is spelled out in the thirteenth-century *Sefer Chasidim*, that imagines God telling us the following:

I gave you wealth so that you could distribute it [in part] to the poor, but you didn't do so...you kept all the money for yourself. Since you

did not keep your part of the bargain, you will be punished as though you have robbed them.

The message of both of these is clear. God has provided us with money, wealth, belonging, blessings, and we are responsible for using them properly, and according to God's will. And a key part of this, as spelled out in the second principle, is distributing the wealth to the poor. If we do not use what our blessings in the right way, we are in essence stealing from God.

So- what now? What am I asking of all of us in this room. In general, I want each of us to be conscious of the words of Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the Mussar ethical movement- who taught that : *A person should be more concerned with spiritual than with material matters, but another person's material welfare **is** his/her own spiritual concern.*

Another person's material welfare **is our** spiritual concern. Let that sink in.

Take a moment to think about all that you own. Close your eyes. Go room by room. Your pantry. Your closet. Your kids rooms. Your basement. Your garage. If you have a second home- go through that as well.

What could you do without? Who could you help if you shared a bit more, had a bit less, gave more to those in need than making that extra splurge purchase, buying that extra item that you already have two of? Or think

back to the Atlanta family -- what if you divided the value of everything you have in half? Could you live well with half the number of clothes? half the number of toys or gadgets? Cars valued at half the price? A house half the size?

Moving beyond each of you as individuals for a moment, I want to bring up something about our community with which I struggle. And that is the fact that we, collectively, do not do enough to help others in need. Yes, we have, historically had programs to help the needy. We do bring in food to donate on the High Holidays (don't forget to bring in your bags tomorrow and throughout the week). We open our doors to ALANON and have housed the JFCS Meals on Wheels program. And we are blessed to have many *individuals* who themselves, or with their families, engage in social action work. But we have not systematically, as an organization, as a synagogue, worked to help those in need. We can do better- and we must do better.

I know that many of you are involved in other organizations that seek to help those in need. I know that many of you take your Jewish responsibility that comes along with a life of plenty, a life of blessing, a life of abundance seriously. And yet- I am asking all of us to do more, because we can always do more. I am challenging us, as a collective, as a community that seeks to build relationships with the broader community, to do more.

Why are we not organizing a multigenerational push to help support worthy local organizations helping the hungry, the poor, our neighbors who are struggling? Why is our synagogue not "known" in the community as a place that reaches out to help its neighbors who are in need? From issues of hunger, domestic violence, mental health, drug abuse, elder care, education, and more -- there are a plethora of organizations and causes that we could work together to support as a congregation.

This does not require lengthy committee discussions. It does not require a congregational vote. It does not require a brainstorming session, like we had the other night in response to ways that we might combat hatred in our community. This is actually much easier. It simply requires some individuals who want to step up and help those who are in need in the larger community. It simply requires all of us who are blessed with so much in our lives, to give back. It simply requires a few of you to go and put your name on the "social action" box in the volunteer wall outside in an effort to help us get started with this work. And look out for information on mitzvah day next June- we are working to bring it back.

In the end, we must never forget that what we pray inside these walls must lead us to action outside these walls. If we hear the words of Isaiah

tomorrow and do nothing- we have fallen short. We have committed a *chet*, a sin, and have, quite literally missed the mark.

So this evening, as we begin to take a personal accounting of our souls, let us also take an accounting of our material possessions. What do we need in life? What do we simply have *way* too much of? What could we live without? And who could we help by sharing our bounty with others? As a *kehilah kedosha*, a sacred community, who could we help, and what kind of huge impact could we have? Where should we start? What are some concrete things that *we* can do *this year* to make a difference, to share our collective bounty with those in need?

The story is told of the great Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, who was known for living a very simple lifestyle. He was once visited by a wealthy Jew who came to seek out a blessing from the rabbi. As the wealthy gentleman entered the rabbi's home, he noticed that he had almost nothing at all. He had a chair, a bed, a lamp, a few books and a minimum amount of food. "Rabbi." exclaimed the man. "How can a man of your stature, of your renown, of your righteousness, live under such conditions?!"

The Chofetz Chayim smiled and responded by smiling at the man and asking him where he was staying during his visit.

"Why, I am staying in the village inn." exclaimed the wealthy man.

"I don't understand." said the Chofetz Chayim. The village inn is a simple place. You are quite wealthy. Surely you could have afforded to stay somewhere much nicer, with many more amenities to suit you.

"That is true." said the man. "But I am just travelling, I am just passing through. I don't need all that much for such a visit."

"Ah." said the Chofetz Chayim. "And so it is with me. I am just passing through. My time here is only temporary. I don't need that much, so I live quite simply."

And so it is with us. We are all simply passing through. We are blessed with so much- and in truth, we likely don't need all that we have.

Let us then, on this Yom Kippur, learn to live with less. As the hunger begins to set in tomorrow, let us remember that there are those who feel this hunger on a regular basis. And let this recognition, on this day of mortality, be a reminder to share all our life's bounty with others.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah- May we all be sealed in the Book of Life for a healthy and fulfilling year. And may we be inspired to help others have the same decree through the generosity of the work of our hands.