

GOOD LIVELIHOOD AND GOOD LIFE

The sermon begins with the telling of the story of The Sabbath Miracle. (A chasidic tale about a poor couple who can barely make ends meet. Shabbos is central in their lives. Shabbos comes, and they are distraught because they have nothing with which to buy a challah, etc. The wife finds 7 gold buttons in an old trunk, which enables her to pawn them for a bag of coins. She gives tzedakah to a beggar and makes a Sabbath feast for herself and her husband.)

Jewish lore is filled with stories like this one about destitute Jews who scrimp and save all year in order to have honey cake on Rosh Hashanah; struggling peddlers who starve all week in order to have challah on the table for Shabbat; or poverty stricken shtetl dwellers who give a few pennies to someone who has even less. In each story, their devotion is rewarded with some kind of miracle. We cherish these stories because of the moral lessons in them: That sacrificing to uphold Jewish observance is meritorious.

Up to now, we have seen the poor Jew in the story as part of a quaint memory of life on another continent in a long gone century. The destitute Jew was merely a symbolic figure. But, suddenly, today, we view the stories from the standpoint of the protagonists. For the first time ever, many of us know the pain and fear of the struggling Jew in very personal and concrete dimensions. The poor Jew is no longer a symbol—s/he is among us.

Thank God, we are not starving. But there are people in this room who are suffering in this time of economic decline. Honestly, we do not really know who among us has been affected and how deeply. But, surely, many of us have lost sleep over how to cover credit card or house payments; we were up at night about funding a child's college education; we've rung our hands over the possibility--or the reality--of losing a job or health insurance--or both simultaneously. We have been forced to cut back and live, in some cases, with much less. This reality has become so pervasive that PBS television felt compelled to pull out its strongest spokesperson last week—Elmo-- to do a "special" on the subject for parents and children in Prime Time. That is a true sign of the times.

As this New Year of 5770 begins, both the occasion and the state of the economy bid us reconsider our expectations. The dawning of a new year gives us a fresh opportunity to review our goals, dreams and aspirations. And even the hardship of this time can open the window to a richer and more fulfilling life, if we approach it in the right way.

At this season, Jewish tradition requires us to take a cheshbon hanefesh, an accounting of the soul. Our Rosh Hashanah liturgy gives us two phrases unique to these seasonal prayers. These two phrases will be our guidelines as we do this accounting and consider how to respond to these very difficult times.

The first phrase is found in the Shalom Rav blessing that we heard a few moments ago. During the Yamim Nora'im, the Days of Awe, a verse is added to this familiar prayer. We add the words: "May we and all of Your people be remembered and inscribed in the Book of Life, Blessing, Peace and Good Livelihood...."

Note that the great metaphor of this season, the image of the Sefer Chayim, the Book of Life, is extended here. It is called the Book of Life, Blessing, Peace and Good Livelihood. The last phrase, "good livelihood," or parnasah tovah in Hebrew, is especially interesting. Parnasah means "livelihood." But it also has the connotation of the peace of mind and well-being that comes from having enough. Along with health and happiness, what could be more important?

Parnasah is about having a job to pay the bills. Parnasah tovah is about living in such a way that our parnasah, what ever it is, becomes enough to live on comfortably. The past year's financial woes have forced many to live more frugally. In the shadow of an era of unprecedented wealth and the accumulation of material goods, many of us are now finding the need to part with some of what we have. Like it or not, during this Great Recession we have been forced consider how to pare down our belongings and live more simply.

We cannot log on to the internet, open the paper or turn on the television these days without seeing a feature on saving money by growing your own vegetables, turning old t-shirts into quilts, returning to simple, family fun at home (like board games) instead of an evening out. We read articles about people who have given up their cars in favor of a bicycle. Tourism agencies have begun to market to their own communities, reminding us of all of the attractions right in our own towns. These ideas are wonderful examples of how to live so that the income we have, though not as much as we would like, will be parnasah tovah, a good livelihood. That is, it will stretch enough to provide us what we need.

In spite of the hard recession, many of us are very fortunate. We have barely felt the impact of the devastation of the economy and are living very comfortably by any measure. But living more frugally is for this group as well. Living with less can be taken on as a challenge to help our fellow human beings and the economy as well. Contrary to popular belief--that spending is always better for the economy--many financial experts today say that the best thing all of us can do to climb out of the economic pit that we are in is to save, save, save. (NPR story, 9/8/09) And Jewish tradition would add, of course: to give, give, give. In this time of scarcity, parnasah tovah, a good livelihood for the already well-off, is about living with less so that we can give more--more tzedakah to those who are on the brink of disaster.

Some are resurrecting the concept of the Jewish Free Loan Society that existed in other periods of Jewish history. This is a pool of funding that the well-off pay into and make available to those in need, so that they can take what they need without embarrassment. In the past year, Jewish communities and synagogues have set up such funds, and it has been suggested to me that we might establish something similar here at Beth Hillel. I do not think it would be hard to do. In this way, we could all share in parnasah tovah, a good livelihood.

The second phrase that addresses this time of economic uncertainty is the term chayim tovim, "a good life." This phrase is found in the Birkat Shalom and other places in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy, including the beloved Avinu Malkeynu prayer. In Birkat Shalom, we praise God as the One who leads us l'chayim tovim, to a good life. In Avinu Malkeynu, we ask God to write us in the Sefer Chayim Tovim, the Book of Good Life.

So, the question becomes, what is this elusive good life which we are seeking? It is clearly not the same as the colloquial idiom "living the good life," which implies living "high on the hog" (you should pardon the expression!) and "having it all." The goal of chayim tovim goes a step beyond parnasah tovah. It goes beyond having enough to be comfortable, to being comfortable with what we have, no matter how little that might be. In the Pirke Avot we read, Eyzeh hu ashir? "Who is rich?" Hasmaei'ach b'chelko. "The one who is happy with what s/he has." (PA) This is chayim tovim.

Now, don't get me wrong. Judaism clearly encourages individuals to better themselves and their lives. But, the Jewish idea of chayim tovim is more about what we do with our lives than it is about what we acquire in our lives.

Chayim tovim is actually very similar to the original idea of the American Dream, a term which was coined, interestingly enough, during the Great Depression. The phrase is attributed to historian James Truslow Adams who described that dream as "a social order in which each man and woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable...."

In his 1931 book Epic of America: Adams said that "The American Dream is that dream... in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...." Notice: The dream is about achieving the fullest of which (we) are capable, not the fullest share of the rewards.

Somehow, over time, the American Dream became associated with homes twice the size of the ones we grew up in, traveling to exotic places on a regular basis, driving a larger than life luxury car, having endless entertainment at our fingertips and more, no matter how many resources we use up or how much money we have to borrow. We need to get back to the original meaning of the American Dream, seeking the nobler and humbler goal of finding fulfillment in human existence: To find meaningful pursuits; to reach our potential in learning and in decency; to make the world better and fairer and cleaner and kinder so that all people can reach their fullest stature, even those who do not have the resources that we do. You hear people say that this time of scarcity has caused them to lose out on the American Dream. They are thinking of a distortion of the Dream. A failing economy can never keep us from reaching toward the true American Dream.

How then do we reverse course on our image of what to pursue in life? We simplify, revise expectations, reconsider the definition of achievement and success—look for it not in the spacious, the exciting, the expensive, and the "more." We look for it in what we already have within us and around us right now.

Again, this message of living more modestly, is not just for those who are struggling financially. Living a more modest life-style can improve the quality of life, that is, it can bring chayim tovim, to all of us. For example, a recent article described how a family in Virginia discovered each other again after simplifying their lifestyle. Surprise! They found that they interacted more when they gave up their 115 channels of cable TV. Another article told of how an uncertain, unfocused college girl discovered her life passion while on a cross-country biking trip where she learned to live with only the very basics, day in and day out.

Jewish tradition encourages us to make such discoveries every week through the concept of Shabbat. The idea of Shabbat is to have a weekly time of living without out all of the accoutrements and gadgets that we have accumulated and instead to spend the day connecting to God, other people and nature. It is similar to how a vacation away helps many couples and families reconnect and return, at least in that week, to the kind of bonds they had when their relationships were new. The modest living and togetherness that Shabbat encourages can bring us that happiness and goodness, Chayim Tovim, every week.

During this Great Recession, it is natural to hope for quick recovery so that everything can go back to the way it was before. But experts tell us that we should not expect that to happen any time soon. Gold buttons hidden in a trunk are most likely not in anyone's future. And yet, the dream of a parnasah tova, a good livelihood and a chayim tovim, a good life, are not beyond our reach if we are willing to modify how we live and what we give, and to redefine what we need to make us happy. If we can succeed in this, we will find ourselves inscribed in the Sefer Chayim Tovim in the coming New Year.