

## Too Much Stuff

Yom Kippur Morning  
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Yom Kippur, 2,000 years ago, looked a little different than it does today. 2,000 years ago, the Yom Kippur ritual was led by the High Priest. He stayed up the night before, going over the details for this day. On the morning of Yom Kippur, he carefully immersed himself in the mikvah, donned special white clothes, and then, throughout the day, he went to work: sacrificing animals. He stood in the courtyard of the grand Temple in Jerusalem and offered up to God bulls, rams, sheep and goats as sin offerings on behalf of the people. The smoke from the burnt offerings arose from the altar of fire up to the heavens.

In the year 70, however, the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, the Jewish people were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, and the sacrificial service on Yom Kippur came to an end. Prayer now became the new substitute for sacrifice. For two thousand years, in place of animals being offered up on the altar, we have offered up words, instead. This morning, however, I want to talk with you about our need to return to the sacrificial system.

Now, already, my Reform grandfather, of blessed memory, is turning over in his grave. "What!?", he would say. "Our Reform movement banished any mention of the sacrificial service from our prayer book, we have eliminated all mention of Priests and Levites and you want to bring back sacrifices?!" But let me explain.

I began thinking about sacrifice, when just a few months ago, I sat in a Brentwood restaurant and watched a group of teen-age girls parading around with what I

was informed were Louis Vitton thousand dollar purses. I began thinking about this when I watched the Russian seniors who come to our synagogue for a hot breakfast and lunch each day, line up outside at a vegetable truck on Monday mornings to buy their vegetables for the week with their very limited incomes. I have been thinking about it as I'm hearing daily now, about the job layoffs and hunger, here in the U.S. I've been thinking about it when some of our congregants come back from a trip overseas and talk about the extraordinary poverty they encountered in the countries they visited.

And I was struck by the thought, as I'm sure all of you, at one time or another in your life, have been struck, by the realization that we could have been born at any time and any place: We could have been born as a serf or a peasant in the Middle Ages in the midst of the plague or we could have been born, now, in this age, as a severely retarded child, as an amputee or with only enough intelligence to get through grade school, or barely through high school, We could be sitting behind a counter at a 7 Eleven or spending our days blowing grass and leaves off driveways. We could have been born just a few miles south, over the border, living in an adobe shack without running water, or on the other side of the world, doing back-breaking work in the fields just to eke out an existence, day after day after day.

But we weren't. Most of us were born into good homes and have created even more comfortable homes for ourselves and our family. And those of us who were born without much, still had opportunities of talent and mind and healthy body to go and work and make it happen. And so we find ourselves living pretty comfortable lives. Not 1 phone but 3! We travel to work or to the store not on foot or on a wagon pulled by a horse, or by a bike but we travel in a car, a car that doesn't have smoke pouring out of the

tailpipe and missing hubcaps, but a car with everything, and I mean everything in it. A car that alone costs more than workers in third world countries will make in a lifetime of working.

Even those of us who are out of work and looking for a job or whose income is not what it should be, are eating. Are we eating rice or beans each day? Are we living literally on what we've grown in our backyard? No, it's food from Albertsons and Ralphs or the oh-so-preciously prepared packages at Whole Foods and Trader Joes. And then, we throw our leftovers away while every three and one-half seconds someone in this world of ours dies of starvation.

We're swimming in too much. Too much stuff. Too many clothes and clothes that are too expensive. Too much of the flavored vodkas and Napa wines. Too much. And that is why, on this day, we are commanded to do without the usual, to refrain from driving our cars around, and shopping and even eating. It is to remind us that we can live without so much of what we have. Which is why, on this day, I want us to give something up. I want us to offer up a sacrifice.

Now I want to be clear, here. I am not saying that we should not enjoy what our hard work and our know-how has brought us. Not at all. But I am asking on this Yom Kippur, that more of what we have be shared with others. Though we have obtained our position in life by a lot of hard work, we also have the things we have because we were fortunate. Most of us had a mother or father who pushed us to go to good schools and to study, we were blessed with parents with brains, we were born in the right place at the right time, to the right people, which is why we find ourselves living on the West Side of

Los Angeles, and though life is hard at times, though we, too, have our own tzuris, let's be clear, not one of us would exchange our lot with a farmer in Peru.

It's simple, really. We have to share what we have with others. That is what tzedakah is all about. Sharing what we have, because we can. We can share so much that it's embarrassing. And I know that you already do this. I know your good hearts. I know the good causes that you give to, and the charity miles that you walk. I know how you give your hand-me-downs to your housekeeper. I know you write checks. But it's not enough. It's not nearly enough.

And, let's be honest. It's never enough. All the wealth in the world will not end hunger. If Bill Gates today, signed over his entire fortune, gave away his billions, let me tell you, it still would not be enough. But it would make a difference, it would have an impact.. We need to give enough to make a difference.

It is not enough not to do harm in this world. It's not enough to be nice and polite and follow the rules. We have to step out, we have to effect the lives of others. Bring more justice, more fairness, more goodness into the world. That's our mission as Jews.

Listen again to the words of the prophet, Isaiah, from this morning: "Is not this the fast that I have chosen? To loosen the fetters of wickedness, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to house the homeless and to clothe the naked?"

And that's why our Torah portion for this afternoon is instructing us how we should leave holy lives, says: "When you're in the middle of harvesting, if the grain falls to the ground, if some grapes fall off the vine, leave them alone so the poor can come and take them. For us, today, that's our leftovers, the hand-me-down clothes, the small

checks we write. But the Torah also tells us that we are to leave the corners of our field. An actual part of what we make is to be shared with others. That's true for us, today, as well. An actual portion of our income needs to go to the poor. How much do we need to give?

There is a Chasidic story about a miser who, after his death, stands before God on Judgment Day, and before him is placed the scale for measuring his deeds. On one pan of the scale is placed all the evidence that he turned his back on the poor and the needy. The scale tips way down on that side. And just as judgment is about to be pronounced, an angel rushes in with a ruble. One ruble. And the angel says: "O Lord, I have evidence, of this man's tzedakah. There was one time in his life when it was snowing and freezing outside, and as, bundled up in his furs, he passed a shivering beggar, he reached into his pocket and tossed him this ruble." And as he goes to place the bill on the other side of the scale, God says to the angel: "give him back his ruble and then send him to hell." Because 1 ruble doesn't make it, my friends. And our yearly contributions to the cancer and the leukemia foundation aren't going to make it either. I'm not denigrating your contributions but I am telling you, and you know it, that it's not enough. It's not enough because it doesn't even make a dent in what you and I have.

On Judgment Day, God is going to put on one side of the scale all the \$18 checks we've written and is going to put on the other side the amount of money we've earned in our lifetime. And God will ask us to compare the two piles and will say to us: "What did you do with all this money that you earned?"

On this day in which our ancestors brought their bulls and lambs as an offering up to God, I want to demand the same of us. As you leave the sanctuary this morning, you

will find out on the tables, a catalog from an organization called Heifer International. Its goal is to supply families in Third World countries with chickens to lay eggs, goats and cows to give milk. Its purpose is to help ward off starvation. When you bring it home, I want you to sit down with your family or sit down in the quiet with your own thoughts and figure out how many families you are literally going to save from death this year.

That is what this morning, I present you with: an opportunity to make the scales more equal and in the process, to save others from death. That's what this day is all about. Remember the words from the Torah portion, just read, which I quoted to you last night: "I put before you life and death", says God. "I put the life or death of others in your hands. Chose life for others on this day."

This morning, I present you with an opportunity to make a difference in the ultimate meaning of your own life. For we also have a choice, whether to have a life which has meaning, in that we brought more goodness into the world, or to have a life like an animal's life: chewing, drinking, reproducing, defecating, getting old and dieing with nothing else to show save a lot of rusted electronic equipment with blinking lights.

This morning, I present you with an opportunity to grow spirituality. To develop the ritual practice, wherever you are, of setting aside a corner of your field. When you go away for two nights in a hotel, go and have a good time, and before you leave, or when you return, offer up a sacrifice. Sit down and write a check in gratitude for the great time that you had and that you could afford to have.. Before you go out to a restaurant, write a check, take \$20 bucks out of your wallet and put it in a tzedakah box . And then order a bottle of wine a little less expensive or order what you want. When you come home from a shopping trip for a pair of pants, a pair of sneakers for your kids, put \$5

into the tzedakah box. And when there's enough money in the box, send your chickens and your goats and your sheep and your cow out into the world, where it will literally, save the lives of another family that could have been your family..

It's ok to remember there's starvation in the world right in the midst of your good time. That's what it means to have a Jewish neshama, a Jewish soul. To be aware of our good fortune and to share it with those in need.

As I have shared with many of you before, in our tradition, Elijah the prophet will announce the coming of the Messianic Age. And to tell if the time is close, he disguises himself as a poor, homeless person and then goes all over the world to see if people will give to him. Elijah stands in the fields of Africa and Asia. He squats in the huts of Somalia and in the parched desert of Sudan. And he looks not toward the East where Jerusalem sits, but rather he looks to the West, he looks here to America with expectation. He looks to the farthest West, to California, and then he looks to the West side, the most privileged, not only of this country but of the entire world. Think of it: the entire world! And Elijah waits for the ox to arrive, for the sheep and chickens. He waits.

My friends, the Messiah will not come on our chump-change. The Messiah will not come on account of our Salvation Army and Good Will clothes donations. The Messiah will not come on our \$18 checks. Rather, the Messiah will come when we are grateful for the gifts and the privileges that are ours, when we are humbled by the blessings that have been bestowed upon us and when we, in turn, truly share those gifts with others. May we, on this day and throughout this New Year, in the midst of our blessings, offer up a sacrifice to save the lives of others, to make a difference in the world.