

**Yom Kippur 5768**  
**Ayn Kemach, Ayn Torah: Only A Moment of Living in the Pit**

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Last week, I was in line for groceries at a crowded grocery store in the city. There were about 4 or 5 people in line behind me when I received the unfortunate news that my total came out to \$9.17. It was unfortunate because I had \$9 with me exactly. No credit card, no ATM card, no spare change in my pocket. I had calculated exactly how much food I could buy for \$9. I had used my coupons, I took 2 pennies from the cup next to the register and still I was 15 cents short. The man behind me cleared his throat several times. He glanced at his watch. I told the woman behind the cash register that I didn't have enough money- she said it's only 15 cents, just take an something out of the bag and she would deduct it. The man behind me told whomever he was talking to on the phone that he was going to be late. He had finally had enough and reached into his pocket. Without looking at me he tossed a quarter onto the belt and said: "There." Last week I was humiliated in a grocery store line as if I was an idiot or poor or just barely human because I was 15 cents short and was holding up the line. I guarantee that if I had been wearing rabbi clothes and been carrying my leather briefcase and had on jewelry instead of sweats and a baseball hat that the blackberry toting, well dressed man who so ungraciously tossed the quarter at me would have very civilly and immediately handed me a quarter. But last week was different. Last week I was on Food Stamps.

What was I doing on Food Stamps? I was participating in the Congressional Food stamp Challenge in which individuals attempt to live on an average American's food stamp budget of \$1 per meal or \$21 per week. It is also the perfect sermon subject for Yom Kippur, the day we fast, the day food is supposed to be the farthest thing from our mind. But, really I'm not talking about food today, I'm talking about hunger. Not only is hunger at the center of our message from the prophet Isaiah in the Haftarah this morning, but going on food stamps is like volunteering to star in a terrifying reality television show. Going on food stamps for a week was not only impossible to accomplish, but it was degrading, demeaning, disgusting, and profoundly eye opening to witness how little tzedek there is our world. Rabbi Shelom of Karlin from the 18th Century taught: If you want to raise a person from mud and filth, do not think it is enough to keep standing on top and reaching a helping hand down to the person. You must go all the way down yourself, down into mud and filth. Then take hold of the person with strong hands and pull the person and yourself out into the light."

I discussed the challenge with my sons Eli and Gabe over dinner at Ton Kiang on Geary and reluctantly, they agreed to participate. The bill for dinner that night was \$40 with a tip for dim sum-which they figured out was the equivalent of over four days of food stamp food for us.

The night before we started I did one last Whole Foods run. It was like the binge before the fast. It is in this bag. I bought 3 Honey Crisp Organic Apples and a Half gallon of Organic Milk. The total: \$8.92. It was the exact amount we could spend the next day on food for three people.

In this bag is the next day's groceries, which I bought with the help of that quarter from the good Samaritan behind me in line: \$9: Beans, rice, tortillas, frozen waffles, bread, peanut butter, 2 bananas.

When we were growing up in this country, we heard: "Eat your food-there are starving children in \_\_\_\_\_" and depending on your generation, it was China or Africa or Europe. In our world today 6 million children under 5 die every year from hunger. It's a fairly gruesome number for Jews to contemplate. But, for many reasons, we can understand that, it is fathomable to us in the developing world, in impoverished countries, over there that 6 million children will die this year and the next and the next and the next. But over here, in the land of the free and the home of the brave, it is a little more difficult to wrap our heads and our hearts around. There are 30 million Americans that are food insecure. That's the term that the

federal government replaced hungry with several years ago. Food insecure sounds better than hungry. Hungry sounds too much like hunger.

The words of Isaiah in our Haftorah are explicit: God isn't really interested in our 24 hours of fasting, of standing around and beating our chests, complaining of our famished state, wondering how many more hours until we can nosh and fress our way through a breakfast or two. God is far more interested in our ability to do teshuvah, to right our own wrongs and get on with work of real tzedek in the world. The prophet Isaiah demands: "What is the fast that I desire: Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily, your righteousness shall go before you, the glory of the Eternal shall be your rear guard. If you shall pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the eternal will guide you continually, and satisfy your desire with good things, and make your bones strong, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters fail not."

Yom Kippur is a day for balance. We are expected to do our own internal work-teshuvah and a day to witness the words of the prophet and do justice. But, we can't act righteously in the world, until we make it right with ourselves. At the very root of teshuvah, its actual essence is hunger. Hunger as in the opposite of complacency. If you are complacent, you can tolerate a lot of wrongs and grief and pain as a result of the life you are living. If you hunger for the truth in yourself, for living with integrity, walking your talk, then you hunger for the results of teshuvah. Each of us is hungry for something today that isn't food. And going without food and drink is the means by which to focus us on that place of hunger, of spiritual lack in our souls. What inside of you is empty, afflicted, lacking that you can fill from your own self, not from the outside? So often, we fill our holes and our pain from the outside with food or power or money or clothes or things or getting ahead or ambition or people or that fabulous new Lexus. All those things make us feel good on some level, but only temporarily.

I believe that Teshuvah is really a four part process. Most of our focus is on two of these-making amends with others and making amends with God. But, the 1<sup>st</sup> step in forgiveness begins not with God and not with others, it begins with the self. Before we can actively face another human being and ask to be forgiven, we must first forgive ourselves. It's not that easy. Last night and this morning when we were reading the al cheyt section..."For the sin that we have sinned before you by..."", not only did I recognize many of those transgressions in myself and not only did I recognize some of them from the previous year's al cheyt lists, but there are still mistakes and errors on that list for which I have yet to forgive myself. Although God is El Elyon-the ultimate and supreme Judge of all Judges, we are the first judge. The one who stares back at us in the mirror. If the first step of teshuvah is self-forgiveness, then the final act of teshuvah is righteous action. The power of teshuvah becomes evident after we turn from the internal work to the work in the world. Each human being is microcosm of the world itself. The Baal Shem Tov taught that when our liturgy says: "Turn from Evil and do Good", the teaching is actually turn toward evil, turn into evil and transform it into Good. We can only do this in the world if have made the honest effort of looking at our own evil, our faults, our dark places in the face and transformed them into good. The Talmud teaches us that "Where penitents stand, the wholly righteous cannot stand." BT Brachot 34b. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz translates this to mean that one who does the real work of teshuvah has the power of the forces of both the good in his soul and in his world and those of evil which he transforms into holiness.

This may sound strange, but one of my holiest tasks involves something that few people enjoy. I love to make my kids their lunches for school. Maybe there is something about not being with them, and knowing that they can feel my love when they open their lunch box. One day during our food stamp challenge I sent Gabriel to school with half of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a banana. His exact words: "Seriously, it was the worst lunch of my entire life." Gabriel is prone to hyperbole, however, it probably was his worst meal. It was literally the worst meal of his life. He and his friends are used to having beyond enough, they are used to excess. One dad in his class shared with me that he sends his son with

enough food for at least two lunches everyday just in case. "In case what?" I asked him. He answered: "In case there was an earthquake or another disaster and that way he would have enough food for dinner if I couldn't pick him up." Another mom admitted to regularly sending almost two complete lunches in case her son rejected the first one. For the week that I was on food stamps, I was hungry, cranky, tired, unfocused and I stole snacks from my assistant. When Gabriel demanded I buy him Doritos from a vending machine as a reward for having gone to a doctor's appointment I told him that we had already spent our money for the day and we each only had a dollar left for dinner. He persisted. He was relentless. I finally took the dollar out of my pocket and handed it to him. He asked what he would eat for dinner if he bought the .95 Doritos from the machine? I told him he would eat his dinner. He asked me how he could eat Doritos and dinner. I told him that was my \$1 for dinner that he could use for the Doritos. He thought about it, looked at the vending machine, looked at the dollar in his hand, looked at my face and in a very serious way, handed me back the money. I can't eat your dinner Ima he told me. You eat it.

You eat it??? In the Pesach Haggadah we read: HaLachma Anya, di achalu avahatana b'ar'a d'mitzrayim. This is the bread of affliction our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat; let all who are in need come share our Passover. What is our affliction today? That we have no bread? No! It is that in our world there is plenty of bread, but there are still hungry people all around us. And for those of us who have enough, what are we suppose to do about it? It's difficult enough to plow through the year of wrongs and transgressions and errors and ask for forgiveness, but to go out and do the same thing for the entire world? Believing in God in a world where we are responsible for doing most of the work would cause people to question perhaps not the existence of God, but at least God's work ethic. And speaking of work, the job description for all the fixing and healing and tikkun is very general. Isaiah's terms are very loose: Feed, Clothe, Shelter...He doesn't have a powerpoint presentation to show us exactly the plan to fix the problem. He just says, once you do your own teshuvah and have returned yourself to equilibrium, get to work on the balance of the planet. But, what is enough? I have enough to buy expensive food. I buy organic fruits and vegetables and milk and meat. I spend excessive amounts of money on food at restaurants. I am not here to chastise you. I am guilty myself of all of your transgressions and I guarantee you many more.

So, here's the challenge. Don't just fast once a year. Make the fast a regular experience. I don't mean fast everyday or once a week. But give up lunch once a week and at the end of the year write a check to Mazon the national Jewish response to hunger. (My kid's organic school lunches average \$7-8 each day!!) Dedicate a day each week and come to our healthy children's pantry at Cobb school. When you put food in your mouth, do it in a Jewish way. Say a blessing. Give some of your food away. Buy more than you need when you are at the market and bring a bag over to the shul for the SF Food Bank-the bins are outside each day that someone in San Francisco is hungry-365 days a year. Get informed and challenge our government to change the way we deal with hunger in America. Call our members of Congress about the 2007 Farm Bill which if passed would change the average food stamp benefit, increase funding to Food Banks and help raise the standard of the Supplemental Senior Food Programs. Read the Farm Bill and find out what's right and what's wrong in it. Over 2 million Californians who are eligible for food stamps are not receiving them. Read Barbara Ehrenreich's book Nickel and Dimed and watch an episode of 30 days in which Morgan Spurlock, the creator and star of Super Size me puts average Americans into settings that are the polar opposite of who they are and what they believe. He and his fiancé tried to live on Minimum wage for 30 days in Ohio-they couldn't make it. Most Americans can't.

A teacher in Minnesota asked his class: "How many of you had breakfast this morning?" As he expected, only a few of them raised their hands. So he continued: "How many of you skipped breakfast this morning because you don't like breakfast? Lots of hands went up. And how many of you skipped breakfast because you didn't have time for it?" Many other hands went up. He was pretty sure by then that the remaining children hadn't eaten, but he didn't want to ask them about poverty. So he asked them: "How many of you skipped breakfast because your family doesn't usually eat breakfast?" A few more hands were raised. Then he noticed a small boy in the middle of the classroom, whose hand hadn't gone up. Thinking

the boy hadn't understood, he asked: "And why didn't you eat breakfast this morning?" The boy replied, his face serious, "Because it wasn't my turn." Irving Cramer

The Prophet Isaiah is challenging us to make good on this year's teshuvah. Being forgiving and forgiven, starting off 5768 with clean hands and a pure heart... if that was it, if that was all we accomplished we could say dayenu. It would be enough to do our own personal teshuvah, walk out the door after Neilah and go to our breakfast. That is, if we were living in the garden of eden or Olam Ha-Bah-the world to come or another planet. It is impossible to live in our world and not see that evil is alive all around us. But I believe in that profound teaching from the Baal Shem Tov, don't turn away and act as if evil doesn't exist, face it, grab it by the kishkes, and transform into something that we recognize and we need more of in this world: goodness, mercy, justice. We do real teshuvah when we turn evil into good. It is not the fast, it is the feeding, the building, the clothing, the housing that will change the world.

Ein Kemach, Ein torah: Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said: Where there is no flour, there is no Torah; where there is no Torah, there is no flour." (Pirkei Avot 3:17)

I was never completely certain what that verse from Pirkei Avot meant. Now I think I get it. Where there isn't enough flour, you can't study Torah. And if you don't study torah you won't learn what we are expected to do with flour. If you don't believe me, take on that food stamp challenge. That will definitely change your mind.

Tzom Kal-An easy Fast!