

Give Food Every Time
Yom Kippur Morning Sermon 2016/5777
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John and his mom fight about food. That's not unusual for a parent and child, but their fight is about who gets to eat. When his mom tries to buy him some food, John says, "Mom if you're not getting yourself something then I'm not getting anything." And she says, "Yes, you are." And John says, "No, I'm not."

John, his younger brother, and his parents live in Michigan. His mom has struggled to find what John calls "a real job." His dad is disabled and can only work part time. John and his brother salvage scrap metal to sell at the local junkyard as a way of supporting the family's income.

For a while they struggled to have any food to eat with regularity. Since they've qualified for food stamps, they feel slightly more secure. They have to manage their purchases carefully, and rely on visits to the food bank along with school lunches to eke out three meals a day. John's grades have suffered when food has been scarce. He longs for a day when they have "the good life again." When his mom has a real job and they are food secure, he commits to helping others that are hungry and share his life with them.¹

Hunger is everywhere. 42 million Americans struggle with hunger. And while everyone who is fasting today will deal with a day of hunger, our chosen fast will be over by tonight. 13% of American households and 17% of households with children are food insecure meaning they aren't sure they will have food for their family tomorrow.²

It's a problem everywhere in this country and right here where we live. Over 14% of New Yorkers struggle with food insecurity. Poverty is considered living on \$16.50 a day per person. Across the country there are families that strive to survive on \$2 a day per person. 4% of all households with children in the world's wealthiest nation are living in a poverty so deep that most Americans don't believe it even exists in this country. That number has doubled in the last 15 years. Such deep poverty doesn't discriminate by race. Nearly half of those families are white.³

Compared to suburban communities, one of the big differences for New Yorkers is our direct and immediate interaction with those in need. We can't help but pass people struggling on the sidewalks. This is not a hidden problem, although the depth of it is often removed from our direct contact.

This afternoon's Torah portion from Leviticus tells us that we must find a way to help. Even a small way. We learn that the rules for harvesting your crops are to

leave the corners alone and to not pick up fruit that has fallen to the ground. The poor and the needy can then come, with some privacy and dignity, to collect this produce and feed their families.⁴

I have always tried to fulfill this mitzvah by putting my pocket change in a Tzedakah box at the end of each day. On any given day, it isn't much, but over the course of the year it adds up and I donate it to Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger. It is also a method that kids can do and learn the value of helping others.

It is no surprise that Judaism advocates for active efforts to feed the hungry. Our history is one of struggle and even food insecurity. Abraham and Sarah went to Egypt to find food.⁵ Isaac and Rebecca went to the Philistines for the same reason.⁶ Jacob's family nearly starved to death before getting grain in Egypt.⁷

As slaves in Egypt, the Israelites had little control over their food. When they wandered in the wilderness, God had to provide Manna so they had enough food for each day.⁸ This might be the first divine government handout.

Throughout Jewish history, our sages and scholars have called for us to help feed the hungry. 2200 years ago, Ben Sira wrote, "A small bit of bread may be life to the poor; one who deprives them of it sheds blood." Around 1000 years ago Exodus Rabbah reflected, "If all afflictions in the world were assembled on one side of the scale and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all."⁹

Telling a Jewish congregation that they are supposed to help feed the hungry isn't a particularly stunning idea. But what difference can we make? We can't stop poverty or hunger. Each of us will only do so much. True. And that's why it's important to always retell the story of the starfish.

A boy was standing on the beach throwing starfish that had washed up back into the ocean. An old man came over to him and asked, "What are you doing?" The boy explained that he was saving the starfish by throwing them back into the sea before the sun's heat killed them. Upon hearing this, the man commented, "Young man, don't you realize that there are hundreds of starfish all along the many miles of this beach? The few dozen starfish that you throw back can't possibly make a difference!" At this, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish, and threw it into the ocean. As it met the water, the child said to the old man, "It made a difference for that one."

Or more succinctly said by Mother Theresa, "If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one."

While our synagogue has always tried to help the hungry, in 5777 we are turning up our efforts and want you to be part of it. We are launching The RTFH Campaign: From Hunger to Hope, a year long project to amplify our work on hunger and invite every member of our expanded community to help make a difference.

You received a handout in your prayerbook with many of the initiatives for the year. You'll also find updates throughout the year on our website just by clicking the campaign's logo at rtfh.org. We will be engaging in activities and collections that are led by and for all areas of our synagogue: Our children and teenagers and seniors, families and singles, in programs, religious services, on your own and all of us together. It has been coordinated by our amazing Social Action Team, but is a campaign for all of us.

Coming up in just a week is our first program, an opportunity to meet with The River Fund of New York who, among their many inspiring programs, help battle hunger by working to move people out of poverty.

Next month is Midnight Run where we will be collecting men's clothing starting this Friday and then distributing them to homeless men at designated spots on a late Saturday evening. We have multiple opportunities to volunteer at food banks and soup kitchens as an individual, a family, and a special one just for teenagers. And on Mitzvah Day next April 1, we will have programs and volunteer activities specifically on hunger in addition to all the other remarkable things done there with kids and adults such as visiting nursing homes, our blood drive, and helping people near and far.

Come to any one of these or other activities and you'll make a difference. For sure, I can guarantee you'll make a difference in yourself. By giving of yourself, you'll shine a light into darkness. One light disturbs the dark. Joined with so many other lights, it brightens the world.

While these projects happen on specific times, there is one that will happen all the time – Our food collection. Previously RTFH collected food for certain times of the year. Now we are always collecting. The words of our Passover Haggadah remind us that hunger is a constant, “Let all who are hungry come and eat; let all who are in need come share.”

And so I invite you to donate food every time. Every time you come to Temple, bring a can or box of non-perishable food. You can plan in advance or grab one off your shelf – you won't miss that can of soup or the box of rice, but someone else

needs it. And you can remind yourself by keeping your green Hunger to Hope bag by your front door to carry your donation of food. Each month we'll be sending food to a local food pantry to help feed our neighbors here in Queens.

Most of the year we are working with two outstanding neighborhood organizations – The Seventh Day Adventist Church in Jackson Heights and Masbia who is soon moving to Kew Gardens.

Masbia is a Jewish sponsored organization and all the food they collect and serve is kosher. Their clientele varies from struggling Russian Jewish immigrants, to local Orthodox children, to others in this area. Masbia has asked us to specifically provide certain needed products. So this month we are especially collecting Kosher pasta and tuna.

The Seventh Day Adventist Church is an incredible dedicated group of individuals who run both a food pantry and a soup kitchen. You are invited to be part of their soup kitchen with a Temple group on the last Wednesday of each month. It's already made a great Bar Mitzvah project. And on Sundays they feed 70-100 people, many of them poor immigrants. The food we donate dramatically impacts their food pantry's ability to help more people and they are grateful for our efforts.

While our food donations will help Jewish and non-Jewish food pantries in the immediate area, sometimes we have to look beyond. The devastation in Haiti from Hurricane Matthew rivals the catastrophe of the 2010 earthquake there. We will be sending food directly to Haiti, but to help even more directly, I urge everyone to make a donation through the American Jewish World Service at AJWS.org to help organizations on the ground reach the people most in need. AJWS.org.

There are hundreds of people in this room. And yes, some of you we may not see until next year's High Holy Days. We'll miss you, but we hope you'll bring a food donation next time we see you. Most of you come at least a few times a year if not a few times a week. Our Religious School students come at least once a week and donating food is something even kindergarteners can do and understand. The difference we can make if we strive to bring food every time will impact our neighbors in Queens and will inspire us to do more. I often say Judaism is about celebrating. And celebrating means food. If we can now equate coming to Temple for services, Sunday School, a meeting, or any other reason with helping the hungry then we have created a legacy we can be proud of.

Earlier this morning we read the famous Haftarah from Isaiah 58. The prophet reminds us that it is not the fast we suffer through today that makes us holy. It is the actions that are inspired. "Is it not to share your bread with the hungry?... 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...the eternal will guide you continually.”

We call out our sins today. We have certainly sinned against the hungry – by ignoring them; by not sharing our blessings with others; by eating too much and by throwing away too much; by treating food casually and by acting as if our fast today is a massive burden when people struggle to eat every day.

But we can make a difference – for the hungry, for our community, for our children, for each other, and for ourselves. Open your heart to making the coming year one where we help bring people from hunger to hope. Establish the meaning of Judaism and our community that our light will rise in the darkness and we will make a difference one person at a time.

¹ <http://mazon.org/the-reality-of-hunger/this-is-hunger/john>

² <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/hunger-and-poverty/hunger-and-poverty-fact-sheet.html>

³ *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, Kathryn J. Edit and H. Luke Shaefer, xvi, xiii, xvii

⁴ Leviticus 19:9-10

⁵ Genesis 12:10

⁶ Genesis 26:1

⁷ Genesis 42:1-3

⁸ Exodus 16

⁹ Exodus Rabbah, Mishpatim 31:14