



Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770

By Rabbi Jesse Gallop

Have you been worried about money? Do you fear that you might lose your job? Do you have problems falling asleep at night because you think about all the unpaid bills you are facing? Are you financially stressed?

Many of us are deeply anxious in regards to the economy and personal finances. The current depression has impacted almost every American's life; be it shrinking retirement funds, smaller incomes, or trying to help family and friends who are in need. And sadly, many of us have allowed these fears to cripple many aspects of our lives. Most of us have hunkered down, looking to outlast the current storm.

During these hard times we look to economist for answers. We believe they have the crystal ball to our future. When did we get so obsessed with money?! I understand having financial stability is important. Our rabbis teach, "Ain Kemach, Ain Torah" meaning without sustenance: having food to eat, clothes to wear, and a bed to sleep in, we are not equipped to study Torah. However, our rabbis also teach "Ain Torah, Ain Kemach" without Torah one does not truly have nourishment in his or her life.

We are not the first generation, nor are we the last, that will face times when money and finances are sparse. I do not want to be flippant or insensitive. I know that there are families in our congregation who are without work, and in real financial troubles. I do not want to make light of such a serious matter. However, life cannot only be about the dollar. Even as we acknowledge the deep pain of financial loss and distress many face, let not another day pass without committing ourselves to the values which are at our core. For life to be meaningful we must be conscious of Torah: teaching the values of living life with *Kedoshim* (holiness), *Ahava* (love), and *Tzedakah* (helping those who are in need). Tonight as we begin the New Year, let us commit ourselves to living these mandates with integrity and act as role models to others in our community. When we live these values, our lives are in service to God and bring great purpose to our daily experiences.

This way of life is exemplified in our biblical story of Joseph, a pampered child who was sold into slavery, achieved a prominent position in Egypt, but then was cast into prison, only to be released and rise to even greater power. He teaches us that in life we will face good times and hard times, even when we live ethically. In the end, at Joseph's highest prominence he encounters his brothers, the ones who sold him into slavery, coming to Egypt starving without food. At this emotionally difficult moment he fulfills all three acts of holiness, love, and charity. For Joseph is aware that he is to serve God and fulfill God's will. But how was he able to know what God wanted? Well, he looked into his heart and understood that even in that moment of pain he was to love his brothers and see their needs. And once he was able to do that, only then, was it possible for him to perform the mitzvah of charity.

Joseph reminds us that we only have one chance to live life, and that the key to a successful life is through sacred living. We live holy lives through our actions.

Connecting with God is achieved through many ways. So often we look at success as having something or achieving a title or position in life. Be it politicians who want elite posts, business men and women who want to be executives in the office, or health care professionals who join bureaucratic positions instead of helping the patients they love. We have been taught that you must be the top of your class in school, the fastest runner on the football field, and the person who wins all debates. Take a moment...are these the things that help you be fulfilled in life? I am not telling you to give up your job and join green peace. Rather, I am challenging you to look in yourself and recognize what makes life worth living.

For many of us we find holiness when we spend time with the people we love. When is the last time you held your spouse and told him or her how much you truly are in love? When you kiss your children goodnight, do you remind them that you love them unconditionally? When you have free time do you use it or do we waste it on the internet or in front of the TV? Life can be filled with sacred moments based on how we act and by focusing on our true purpose of living.

Sometimes it is easier to be aware of when we diminish holiness in our lives, rather than searching for it. We dim the light of God when we let work dominate our lives making everything else secondary. Some of us are constantly traveling to make "Important sales" and promote business. We stay late at our offices preparing for meetings to counsel clients and to market ourselves. We sit at home on weekends with one hand working on the laptop and the other hand holding our blackberry with the justification that business can't wait not even on Shabbat, not even to attend your child's soccer game.

We also devalue holiness and life when we cheat, steal, and value money more than human life. Be it when we lie on taxes, support policies that hurt the poor and weak, or embezzle money from corporations and clients. Bernard Madoff, Enron, and so many others have exemplified how a little greed can lead to major disaster. So often we cut a corner and tell ourselves "This isn't hurting anyone." Wrong, cheating and lying first and foremost hurts our own souls, and will likely hurt others.

Another way we lessen our innate connection with God is by lying to ourselves pretending that life is okay when we know we are living a lonely path that pushes others away. We have become so overwhelmed in life that we think about time in sequence of tasks. "I wake up in the morning, get my kids off to school, get to work, 'Oh, I forget to call ____, I'll call him during lunch, and after work I will rush to get errands done, then make dinner, pay bills, help my child with home work, and then finish the work I brought home with me before I go to bed.'" This is not Jewish living! The meaning of life is not fulfilled by how many task or acts we perform, no to live Jewishly is by focusing on how to truly connect with others and the world around you. This is how we link our lives with God. The day should start with "I love you." When you see someone you love, tell them how you feel; be it your spouse, your children, or other family members and friends. We need to feel the hearts of others; we need to be aware of how we unintentionally push people away.

Charity is also a way in which we can connect with ourselves as we help others. So often it is easier to see what we lack. We have gotten swept up in acquiring things. A new car will make me happy, or maybe I just need a family vacation to get over being burned out. It is so easy to get swept up in consumeristic ways of thinking. As a result,

we stop focusing on what really matters: health, love, and emotion and spiritual growth. It is at moments of frustration, emptiness, & exhaustion when the action of *zedakkah*, volunteerism and charity, is truly needed in our lives. Through helping others we are reminded of what we have because we see the holiness others make when they have less. So often I hear our bar and bat mitzvah students talk about their volunteer experience. It is so rewarding when our young people share that they thought volunteering was only about helping people who were in need, and realizing how all people are truly special and that by donating time and money they were also improving their own lives. I know from personal experience that when I help others I gain optimism about life. Together working with community groups and people in need, I am able to believe in myself and humanity. That we are working together for a joint purpose in honor of God and community.

As we enter the year 5770, let us be reminded that when we live a life based on holiness, love, and charity we are never without. During this High Holy Day season, let us internalize and be aware of the prayers we speak: In our liturgy we pray, "Let us not be consumed by desires for what we lack or grow unmindful of the blessings which are already ours." Please reflect on what you do have, and how you can help strengthen our world by empowering your life and helping others. As our sage Rabbi Ben Zoma taught, "Who is rich?" His answer: "*Ha-sameach b'chel-ko*, the person who can be joyful about his or her portion". Let us all be aware of our blessings, for life itself is our gift. Each day we have possibilities and choices, so don't give up. May your life in this year ahead be filled with riches, especially the treasures of love, support, and fulfillment.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon, May this be God's will.

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