

Yom Kippur Morning
2008/5769
Congregation Beth Israel

If I were a rich man...

I know that you might not be able to tell from my singing but I did play Tevye in the JP Taravella high school production of Fiddler on the Roof.

Those very familiar words to a popular book, play, and movie speak volumes to us. When Tevye the Dairyman sang that song in Fiddler, he was passionate, he was hopeful, and he was desperate. Tevye was the head of a family of seven people. He worked hard, and he worked tirelessly to ensure that his family had what they needed to survive. It wasn't easy and sometimes it was scary, but Tevye and his family somehow made ends meet.

As you might recall in the film, Tevye spoke about wealth. He dreamed of a big house and the fineries in life; but throughout the film his intentions were always good. He sought to better his life and the lives of his family...and ultimately he wanted time, time to pray and give back to his community. So what's wrong with being rich he'd ask?

What's wrong with being rich is an excellent question. The answer is that there is absolutely nothing wrong with being rich. The problem arises when rich isn't good enough, when wealth needs to equal power, and when greed settles in.

As you know the United States has had a less than stellar month financially.

I think many will recall that IndyMac, the largest mortgage lender in the US collapsed due to tighter credit, falling home prices and rising foreclosures. Lehman Brothers was the next institution to declare bankruptcy, followed by the government bailout of AIG.

Times are difficult for everyone. Our investments have been compromised, our nest egg dented, and our trust in the financial system severely tested. The New York Times reported that the American economy lost 159,000 jobs in the month of September alone. Although the recently passed "bailout" plan may stabilize some parts of the economy, most reports say...well it's better than nothing. It's challenging to hear that we are currently living through the most devastating

financial crisis since the great depression or perhaps ever. What does that mean? How do we cope? What should we do?

When we sat here last year, reading the Yom Kippur liturgy, most of us would not have guessed that we would be in this dire financial situation. It seems that our economy has been as shaky as a Fiddler on the Roof. A lot can change in a year, some of us have lost our jobs, many can't sell our homes, and we all have difficulty filling up our gas tanks. The Unetaneh Tokef reminds us of the question: Who shall be poor and who shall be rich?"

The answer to that question is unknown, but this prayer reminds us that Repentance, Prayer, and Tzedakah temper judgments severe decree! These three pillars: repentance, prayer, and tzedakah create the foundation for our year. Two of the three are internal: when we repent, no one knows the sincerity in which we introspect, and when we pray, no one knows the true internal meditations of our hearts. However, when we engage in tzedakah we physically do something.

The brilliance of the word tzedakah is its grammatical root, tzedek which means righteousness. So, tzedakah doesn't just mean charity, it's much more...it's a righteous act! When we are righteous in our actions then we can make a difference in the world.

If everyone acted with righteousness the world would undoubtedly be a better place. Imagine if everyone in your life acted righteously: the postal worker, your drug company, the fast food employee, your investment broker, your hairdresser, your bank president, your mechanic, and your insurance company. How would our daily lives be different if everything we said and did was righteous; every meeting and action we performed was based in righteousness.

In this morning's haftarah, the prophet Isaiah is yelling at us! He's speaking to us about our fast. Through his message God tells us to cease our empty thoughts, and to stop our meaningless acts of going through the motions...Isaiah says (Isaiah 58:6-8):

'This is not the fast that God wants from you, a fast just to afflict yourselves; instead God wants you to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the poor into your house? When you see the naked, clothe them.'

In other words Isaiah is telling us that the passive act of simply fasting because we have to, simply going through the motion of not eating will not bring us any closer to redemption. God

doesn't want us to needlessly starve just as a physiological exercise. Our fast is futile if it's just an empty act that we do for Yom Kippur. The fast that God wants is much more complex. God is seeking true introspection in our repentance, focused intent in our prayer, and selfless action in our tzedakah. *God is seeking righteousness.*

Yes it's beautiful that we brought in thousands of pounds of groceries today, and it's wonderful that we remember to temper judgments decree with repentance, prayer, and tzedakah today on Yom Kippur, but what about tomorrow? What about the rest of the year; 3 days from now won't our friends need our repentance, 3 weeks from now won't God need our prayers, and 3 months from now won't our community need our tzedakah?

In these tricky financial times, righteousness is even more elusive. When we are facing hard times personally, it's difficult to think of others. When we are worried about our own homes, investments, and expenses, how can we be expected to worry about anyone outside of our own families?

Rabbi David Wolpe writes in his book Floating Takes Faith, "Jewish law mandates that even a beggar who receives tzedakah must in turn give tzedakah, for it is important for all of us to feel that we have something to give. *But what of people who truly have nothing?* Tzedakah is often material, but not always. We give tzedakah when we share our imagination, our efforts, and our love. Tzedakah is the gift God expects us to give one another. Giving money, while essential, is only the beginning."

Even the recipient must in turn give tzedakah. In other words, giving tzedakah is not a choice; it's a mitzvah, commandment, and an obligation. Being righteous is our responsibility.

So, how can we be righteous during these difficult times? Maimonides a 13th century theologian explains, a tzaddik, a righteous person, is someone whose merit surpasses their iniquity. According to this definition *everyone sitting in this room can be righteous!* We don't need to save the world...righteousness can be achieved in small everyday actions. Make tzedakah a habit.

Every time we go shopping we can buy two or three additional items and drop them in a separate bag in our pantry...when the bag is full, donate it. Did you know that there is a donation bin right

in the rotunda at Beth Israel? Every time you come to the synagogue for religious school, pre-school, services, or an event, bring an item and drop it in the bin. We can also find a comfortable percentage of our annual salary to donate. Collect your loose change from each week and give away the sum at the end of the month. Sign-up to Race for the cure this weekend with Beth Israel. Volunteer at a food pantry, retirement home, school, or shelter. Don't just give charity; that's easy...be righteous!

We can keep ourselves focused by creating a daily righteousness checklist:

- Did my merits outweigh my iniquities today?
- Did I make someone's life a little bit sweeter?
- Did I judge myself without judging others?
- Did I help someone today without expecting anything in return?
- Did I act with integrity?

During the opening song from Fiddler on the Roof, the following conversation takes place:

Nachum: the beggar says [*begging*] Alms for the poor! Alms for the poor!

Lazar Wolf: the butcher replies- Here, Nachum, here's one kopeck.

Nachum: One kopeck? Last week, you gave me two kopecks!

Lazar Wolf: answers I had a bad week.

Nachum: responds, So? If YOU had a bad week, why should I suffer?

Just because we have a bad day, week, or month, it does not mean that we can cease acting righteously. When we are righteous in giving tzedakah, and finding ways to temper judgments severe decree, the question of who shall be poor and who shall be rich is less significant. It's easy to be righteous when it's Yom Kippur- we're sitting here and fasting. Be righteous when it's difficult, be righteous when others aren't - in the words of Rabbi Hillel: in a place where there is no righteous person, endeavor to be that person.