

Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah!

The Haftarah portion for today is Isaiah 58: 1-14 this parsha is about fasting. It describes the right way to fast and the wrong way to fast and the reasons behind both. In 6-7 Isaiah, after describing how some people choose to fast he corrects them and indicates the right way to do so:

6. No, this is the fast I desire:  
To unlock fetters of wickedness,  
And untie the cords of the yoke,  
To let the oppressed, go free;  
To break off every yoke.

7. It is to share your bread with the hungry,  
And to take the wretched poor into your home;  
When you see the naked, to clothe him,  
And not to ignore your own kin.

On this day of repentance, while we fast, we need to remember that we are not alone and that we fast only because we are supposed to do so. Many people have no choice. We must remember that are part of humanity and as such we are indeed responsible for both ourselves, our family, and for seeing and aiding those who are not as lucky as we have been. We live in a country that has relative poverty, however many countries in the world today have absolute poverty.

The difference is that relative poverty is when people are poor relative to those around them and absolute poverty is when people do not have enough money to purchase what is needed for survival. In this country, very few people live in absolute poverty since we do have resources that can be utilized to help them. However, in many countries around

the world people do live in absolute poverty, without any resources; which is usually a death sentence, especially for children.

The push for economic growth in recent decades has led to substantial increases in wealth for large numbers of people across the globe. But, despite huge gains in global economic output, there is evidence that our current social, political and economic systems are exacerbating inequalities, rather than reducing them. A vast majority of the global poor live in rural areas and are poorly educated, mostly employed in agricultural sectors, and over half are under 18 years of age.

Accurate figures for absolute poverty in the world today as of the end of 2016 include the following:

- 383 Million people in Africa
- 327 Million people in Asia
- 19 Million people in South America

So, a total of 729 people are currently living in absolute poverty worldwide. This means that the average wage per person is \$1.09 per DAY.

Of these, every year around ten million people in the poorer countries die of illnesses that can be very cheaply prevented or managed, including malaria, HIV, tuberculosis and diarrhea. However, the birth rate, due to a lack of contraception multiplies.

Economists use the term 'poverty trap' to denote a situation in which individuals are stuck in deprivation over long periods of time, and there is nothing that they can do by themselves to escape their situation. The idea is simple: poverty today causes poverty in the future, so households that start poor, remain poor.

Insufficient nutrition, for example, can lead to a poverty trap. More precisely, the physical capacity to work increases exponentially with food intake at low levels: (bear in mind that the first calories that we consume are used by our body to survive, rather than to provide the strength required to work). Thus, it is possible that those in extreme poverty get stuck in a perverse equilibrium characterized by low incomes and low nutrition; poor nutrition then becomes both the cause and consequence of poor incomes.

So, just feeding people does not help lift them from poverty. They must first have enough food to sustain their physical bodies before they can be expected to work for just a sustenance living. It is estimated that families existing at that subsistence level make \$1.09 per day or \$7.63 a week or \$30.52 a month or \$366.24 a year. This amount per year is probably a little less than many of you spent on utilities just this past month. In contrast, it is expected that the average family in America spends more than \$30 for a family of four on **one** fast food meal.

Now, I know that you may be thinking that people in these countries can buy more for their \$1.09 a day than we can buy. This is and isn't true. Yes, they can buy tiny amounts of food for themselves and perhaps even their family, however, if you lived on the streets of Topeka and got one small meal a day and nothing else...how would you survive? Where would you live? How would you buy clothing or shoes? How would your children survive? Would you be healthy?

According to Oxfam, the 85 richest people in the world today have as much money as the poorest **half** of the people in the world and that 70 percent of people live in countries where economic inequality has increased in the last three decades.

It is extremely easy for me to stand up here and talk about this problem and it is equally easy for all of you to sit and listen; perhaps to squirm in uneasiness regarding the facts and figures that I have mentioned. However, this high holy day of Yom Kippur is the day that we must all be reminded of how wonderful our lives really are. Sure, we are hungry if we are fasting, but imagine for one minute if you multiplied that hunger by 365 days a year and then imagine if you were forced to watch your children, friends and neighbors suffer from the same hunger day after day and year after year with absolutely no hope of relief.

We fast because it is a mitzvah, a sacred commandment. In Numbers 29:7, we are instructed: On the tenth day of the same seventh month you shall observe a sacred occasion when you shall practice self-denial. Thus, we fast, we do not brush our teeth or drink water. And many of us complain how difficult it is to go without food and water for 24 hours.

There are four Hebrew words that describe why we fast: the first is the concept of humility, **Anavah** which I combine with **Chesed** or loving kindness. The next word is **Nephesh** which is one of the words for soul. Our souls are afflicted and we fast to help cleanse ourselves of that affliction by moving towards **T'Shuvah** or repentance for our wrong actions, some of which have been inflicted on others and ourselves; sometimes unknowingly.

Two years ago, temple members spent a year studying the principles of Mussar. One of those was Anavah or humility. The chapter on Anavah in the text ***Everyday Holiness*** begins with the words:

*“Occupy a rightful space, neither too much nor too little. Focus neither on your own virtues nor the virtues of others.”* The meaning being that we should know our place in the world and occupy it and that we

should turn our attention to making ourselves better, not glorifying in our virtues and not measuring ourselves by the virtues of others.

We all crave approval and honor as validation for our lives, however, many people crave it much more than others. And, unfortunately, we tend to associate Anavah, or humility, as being like a rather low creature, not craving praise or honor. However, true Anavah is associated with spirituality, giving to one's self and to others just to give for the joy of giving. One must have courage and inner dignity to have a sense of healthy self-esteem. In order to gain this, true Anavah begins at home, with ourselves because it is only through developing a healthy sense of self-esteem can we approach Anavah.

As part of developing a sense of self-esteem we need Chesed or loving kindness. This is the impulse to do justice, to love loving-kindness and to walk humbly with G-D. Chesed is not just being kind, it means doing things, acts that sustain others; offering real sustenance to one another on a daily basis. We can offer time or money, but we can also offer empathy, an open ear, writing a letter, visiting an old friend, saying words to someone who needs to hear them, or making that long overdue phone call. It is easy to think good thoughts and say the right things, but it is also easy to deceive ourselves, to make excuses, that we do not have time or money.

Sometime ago I read an article about the employees of Walmart. The article said that even though the majority of the employees received low wages and had no benefits that they gave the most money to the poor during the holiday season. I believe that this is true because these people have experienced being poor and have empathy for others who are poor. However, the most incredible fact of the article was that the corporation of Walmart itself, one of the richest corporations in the world, gave much less money than its employees. Chesed is really

translated as generous sustaining benevolence, which the employees of Walmart demonstrated.

It is through truly practicing Chesed and Anavah that one can build one's self-esteem and it is only when we have a healthy sense of self-esteem that can reach out to others to offer them the support and sustenance that they need. Perhaps the employees of Walmart demonstrated this better than the owners of the corporation did. Because it is through truly practicing Chesed and Anavah that we can come to our own self-realization and not depend upon others as mirrors of our lives.

Finally, we have Rachamim, or compassion. The Mussar text uses the phrase "Kindness, empathy, and care which arise from standing so close, feeling what the other feels." I love that the root for rachamim means womb, so the word rachamim is connected with motherhood, with caring like a mother cares for her child. The Mussar text also says that compassion or rachamim, is so fundamental to the world that the Talmud declares that it is one of the ten elements through which the world was created. It is the meeting and balancing point for all the channels that bring down loving kindness on one hand and strict judgment on the other. Compassion blends these energies and so achieves and promotes balance between the necessary hard and rigid aspects of life and the equally necessary soft and caring ones.

There is a beautiful midrash that suggests that compassion is something that we practice, ultimately, for our own sake. This midrash, part of a collection called Rabbi Tan-chuma, relates that, at a time of drought, the people of Israel called on their Rabbi to declare a fast and to pray to G-D for compassion, in the form of rainfall. The fast proceeded for one day, then two, then three, and no rain fell. Then the rabbi called on the people to be filled with rachamim, compassion, for one another, and

that when they did that God would in turn show compassion to them. And so, they did, and the rains began to fall.

You can have a good and kind heart, but it is only through elevating our inner traits of Chesed, Anavah and Rachamim that we can cleanse our own souls and move towards T'Shuvah or repentance. The root of the word T'Shuvah means "to turn" (back, to or from), "return", or "repent:" in this way we can see that it is only through loving kindness, compassion and humility that we can return, or turn from our unhealthy inclinations and return to the healthy ones.

It is the job of everyone to offer humility and compassion to those who need it, to aid G-d in helping to create the balance between the hard and rigid aspects of life and the soft and caring ones. In so doing we give ourselves the greatest gift which is self-esteem and self-realization.

Finally, we fast to remember that we are not alone in this world that we exist in a place of wealth; full of food and security and resources untold; and that others do not. We fast to remember that we need to nurture not only ourselves but others; physically, mentally and emotionally.

*In Isaiah 10-11 it says:*

10. If you offer your compassion to the hungry  
And satisfy the famished creature--  
Then shall your light shine in the darkness  
And your gloom be like the noonday.

11. The Lord will guide you always;  
He will slake your desire in parched places  
And give strength to your bones.  
You shall be like a watered garden,  
Like a spring whose waters do not fail.

In this parsha the prophet Isaiah pointed out the difference between need and greed, he encouraged all of us to have compassion, or rachamim. But, he also held that the reward for demonstrating that compassion is huge. I continue with his words:

14. Then you can seek the favor of the Lord,  
I will set you astride the heights of the earth,  
And let you enjoy the heritage of your father Jacob,  
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

There is a reason why this Haftarah was chosen for the most important fast day of the Jewish year the Prophet Isaiah's lesson is that fasting alone is not enough, unless there is a moral and ethical foundation to the ritual behavior.

We bring bags of food to feed the hungry in our midst and hopefully promise to continue to help feed and clothe them throughout the year as is commanded by G-d. We have the opportunity to contribute to Mazon an organization which is dedicated to fighting hunger and there are many other Jewish and non-Jewish organizations that fight poverty and hunger in the world today; it is up to all of us to help reduce those needs. Hopefully to help lift people out of absolute poverty and at the same time lift our own souls from poverty to fullness.

Finally, we should never forget how fortunate we are to be able to bring food to others and have enough clothing to be able to offer it to those in need. In showing our Rachamim, or compassion we fulfil our promise of humility and humanity to others.

And let us say: Amen