

RH Eve Sermon 2009/ 5770:
You are Your Brother's Keeper
Rabbi Michael Schwab

Shanah Tovah.

There were two brothers, farmers, who tilled the field that they had inherited from their father. The younger brother was unmarried and lived alone at one end of the field; the older brother lived with his wife and four children at the other end. The brothers loved each other dearly. Together they plowed, planted, and harvested their wheat and shared equally the fruits of their labor.

One night during the harvest, the younger brother lay down to sleep, but his thoughts were troubled. "Here I am," he said to himself, "all alone, with no wife and no children. I don't need to feed or clothe anyone else. But my brother has the responsibility of a family. Is it right that we share our harvest equally? After all, he needs so much more than I do." At midnight he arose and took an armful of sheaves from his crop, carried them to his brother's storehouse, and left them there. Then he hurried home for more.

That same night, the older brother also could not sleep. He was thinking about his younger brother. “Here I am,” he thought, “surrounded by my family. When I grow old, my children will take care of me. But what will happen to my brother in his old age? Who will take care of him? His needs are so much greater than mine. It isn’t fair to divide the crop equally.” So he arose and took an armload of sheaves to his brother’s storehouse and left them there. Then he hurried home for more.

Each brother, upon returning to his storehouse, was shocked to find just as much grain there as had been there before. Wondering how that could be possible, each man filled his arms with yet another load of sheaves and journeyed back across the field. And so it continued all night long, neither brother noticing the other’s kindness in the darkness.

The first rays of sun appeared on the horizon. Only then, while crossing the field on the way to the other’s storehouse, did the brothers finally see each other in the shadows. Suddenly they

understood. They dropped their sheaves and embraced, weeping with gratitude and happiness.

According to the rabbis of old, God saw this act of love between the brothers and blessed the place where they met that dawn. And when in the course of time King Solomon set out to build God's Temple, from which peace, justice and blessing were to flow, God instructed him to build it on that field, on the very spot where the two brothers had embraced.

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Now let me tell you another story.

There were two brothers living off the land. One was a farmer, the other a shepherd. When it came time to bring offerings of thanksgiving to God, each brother brought a **separate** offering: the farmer, the fruits of the field, the shepherd, an offering from his animals. God preferred the offering of the Shepherd but accepted both. Enraged that his offering was considered second-best he found his brother in the field and murdered him. Soon God approached Cain and asked him, "Where is your brother, Able?"

And he replied, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain was then marked and condemned to wander alone for the rest of existence without a home.

Two powerful stories. Two stories about brotherhood, community, love and connection. Two stories, told from opposite perspectives that have much to teach us about how we engage with the world and each other. One, a story of love, compassion and deeds of loving kindness. The other, a story of jealousy, competition, anger, resentment and hatred. One led to joy and gratitude, paving the way for nothing less than the creation of holiness and blessing, personified in the construction of the ancient Temple. The other led to death, loneliness, isolation and punishment.

After killing his brother, Abel, Cain asked God: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” In each generation, symbolized in the annual cycle of the Torah reading, we must answer him. Cain, the answer is “yes”. In fact, the answer is “yes” for all of us. We are all, indeed, our brother’s keepers. How differently this story may have

ended if Cain had understood that lesson. How differently the story may have developed had Cain and Able seen each other in the way the two brothers of the first story had. Seeing each other as equals, caring about the welfare of the other, working for the happiness of each other.

Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of a new year and celebrates the creation of the world. It is a time of abundance culminating in the feast of plenty we celebrate on Sukkot. In fact this entire season symbolizes the feeling of plenty and blessing – the ability to provide for all, for every creature created in God’s image. In both of the stories I told tonight, the necessary resources existed to support and provide blessing for each of the characters. Yet, in the first story the brothers valued the well-being of the other in the same way they valued their own and thus they treated their resources with generosity -- happily sharing with the other whom they perceived to have a greater need. In the second story, each brother treated what he had as his own, presented and used what he had separately and exclusively. And then when one

perceived the other to have “more”, he saw the world as “us” and “them”, so he lashed out in resentment and hatred. **Together**, the gifts of Cain and Able could have been greater. **Together** their resources could have been sufficient. **Together** they would have felt equality. Sharing what they had could have lead to love and blessing, instead of hate and death.

Natural resources, especially food, are a central part of every Jewish holiday, whether through its abundance or poignant lack. The abundance of food during Rosh Hashanah, for example, exists in stark contrast to the scarcity we experience while fasting on Yom Kippur. This contrast heightens our awareness of the blessing of food, for fasting, the denial of food, mimics the experience of *dying*, while eating on Rosh Hashanah and at breakfast demonstrates how food can bring us back to life. With their different ways of engaging us in the notion of sustenance, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur offer us the opportunity to consider the bounty and scarcity of resources that exist in the world and which are, or are not, available for each of the world’s communities.

While *our* fast on Yom Kippur is merely a metaphor for the fragility of our lives, which ends with the anticipated note of the Shofar, for over a billion people in the world, a lack of food is a very real danger to their survival. Sadly, hunger is a debilitating reality for large populations in many under-served countries in the world as well as for certain at-risk populations right here in our home communities. Lack of food is a serious problem that affects millions of lives on a daily basis.

In *Pirkei Avot*, the Ethics of our Fathers, an ancient Rabbinic book of wisdom, it says: “*Im ein kemach, ein Torah*” -“Without sustenance, there is no Torah.” In essence, this saying points out the obvious truth that if we cannot provide for our basic needs, we cannot ever reach our potential as individuals, as Jews, or as a society. There will be no strength for Torah if we cannot provide the minimal needs our bodies require to function. Without the equitable distribution of the world’s divinely created natural resources we cannot hope to fulfill God’s commands.

This line from Pirkei Avot offers us a powerful reminder on a day during which we review the year that has passed and look forward to the year that will come. It challenges us, in the most basic terms, to dream of a world that is better. To provide the minimal needs for people so that they have the resources to pursue loftier aims. The goal of the service and the customs surrounding these holidays are to inspire us to engage ourselves in the process of improvement, to motivate us to action beyond the walls of the synagogue and the hours of the service.

One such well-known prayer that deals with the fragility and importance of life, is *Unetaneh Tokef*. Through its famous characterization of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as the days when God decides, “who will live and who will die”, we are confronted with the majesty of God and alternatively the seeming insignificance of human beings. Yet, at its conclusion, the *unetaneh tokef* prayer boldly pronounces that, “*Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah*” (Repentance, Prayer and Acts of Justice) can affect God’s decrees. God may have ultimate control of life and death,

however, we clearly have an important role to play in the *quality* of life on this earth. This pronouncement reinforces the notion that we are in a partnership with God, that we, through deeds of holiness, have the power to redeem.

One way in which we can clearly partner with God in the process of redemption is in the distribution of the resources, both human and natural, that God has created for us in this world. In the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer the *payatan* proclaims that all of Israel passes before God, “*Kivnei maron*”, usually translated to mean, “as a flock before its shepherd”. In this image, all of Israel, indeed all of humanity, is part of one flock, one community, which is accounted for by one unified Shepherd. And according to the prayer as we pass under His shepherd’s staff, “*V’tach’toch kitzvah l’chol b’riyah*”— God apportions a fixed amount to **every** creation.” One interpretation of this phrase is that according to our liturgy, by a God-given decree, every creation is given his “portion”. And while the question of what “his portion” means

exactly, is left unanswered, I believe that, at the very least, it needs to mean: the minimum a person requires to survive and thrive.

Further, as Rabbi Steven Exler points out, if we look ahead to the Haftarah of **Yom Kippur** morning, Isaiah tells us that Yom Kippur is to be a day during which “paros l’ra’ev lachmecha”—a day of apportioning bread to the hungry. A Midrash on this text reads “paros”— apportion, as “parus”—already apportioned. That is, according to the Midrash, that which we are to give to the hungry on Yom Kippur is already apportioned by God. ‘When was it apportioned?’ asks the Midrash. ‘On Rosh Hashanah.’ This Midrash, therefore, reinforces the image in *Unetaneh Tokef* that God, on this Day of Judgment, is demanding that we partner with Him and distribute properly the food and resources that God has set aside today for the hungry. Therefore, among the many things demanded of us during these Days of Awe, is to ensure that our fellow human beings do not go hungry.

Clearly since the beginnings of creation, we have been less than perfect in following this decree: some have more and some

have less. We have come to accept that as fact, as “how the world works”. However, on these High Holidays we are being asked to commit ourselves to make some correction in that imbalance, to strive against “the way the world works” to the best of our ability.

According to statistics, there is plenty of food in the world; it is not a matter of the failure of nature or our limitation in production. In fact, for those who like numbers, world agriculture produces 17 percent more calories per person today than it did 30 years ago, despite a 70 percent population increase. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization this is enough to provide everyone in the world with at least 2,720 kilocalories per person per day. I have no idea what that means but I am told that this is more than sufficient for healthy living. Nor is it a matter of human ability to distribute the food. As Martin Luther King prophetically wrote in 1967 in a famous speech called *The World House* in which he spoke of the scourge of poverty, he said, “There is no deficit in human resources; the deficit is in human will.” Thus, the question is not “can we”, but “will we”?

With this in mind, when we read that phrase tomorrow in *Unetaneh Tokef*, that God apportions a fixed amount to every creation, we must keep in mind that there are those whose plates are full and those whose plates are empty. We must reflect upon a year when almost a billion people lived—and continue to live—in hunger; a year during which hundreds of millions of children were malnourished. And we must recall that same year in our own lives. While many of us have suffered in various ways, we still live in a community where food is available and we must be thankful for what we have. However, we cannot stop at mere appreciation. Our gratitude must motivate us to act to ensure that those who did not have full plates this past year will be able to experience the same thankful and satiated feeling that we will have the privilege of experiencing over this holiday season.

What can we do? While God is the one who writes and seals our fate, we are responsible for influencing **what** God will write, and **which** fate God will seal. Even as we pass before God as sheep, we must remember that we have been told that, “*teshuvah*

u'tefillah u'tzedakah ma'avirin et ro'a hag'zeirah" — that “repentance, prayer and acts of Justice, avert the evil of the decree.” Through our *teshuvah*, our desire to do things better, through our *tefillah*, which sanctifies life and articulates our values, and through *tzedakah*, the giving of our resources, we *can* reduce the evil in the world. As Maimonides wrote, *teshuvah* means being in the same situation we were in before and doing things differently. Therefore, in regard to hunger we need to look at what role we play in the holy task of apportioning God’s resources anew this year. We need to be advocates for those who cannot advocate for themselves. We need to make sure our representatives, our president and our local organizations know that we care about this issue. There is enough to go around, we must think about how we can ensure that the world’s resources are distributed more equitably this year than last.

We can make a difference through *tefillah* too. We can include people living with hunger in our prayers. We can use *tefillah* time for discussions like these, for raising the value of

“feeding the hungry” to our consciousness and for using our heightened awareness to spark our action.

And we can use our *tzedakah*, the sharing of our personal resources, to affect change as well. I know that *tzedakah* is not as easy in these times, times that have made life harder for people all around the globe. However, *tzedakah* means taking seriously the obligation to support the most needy. As Rabbi Exel put it, “It means understanding that if we want to dream of a world without hunger, we need to act to make that world real”. And we can. We can give to important local organizations that fight hunger, like the ARK and other food pantries, and to organizations like American Jewish World Service that locate partner organizations world-wide for us that are worthy of the Jewish community’s money. Like anything else, fighting hunger costs money. Making sure everyone has what they need requires us to give what we can.

Not long after this sermon, we will go home. Apples and honey and a beautiful meal hopefully await us—as they should. “We don’t need to eat less, for others to eat more. Yet as we do

the business of the day, as we review the year that has passed, as we picture the year to come, and as we dream of the world as it might be, I hope we can think as individuals and as a community about the question of hunger and natural resources. Through *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*, I pray for us all to return here on Rosh Hashanah 5771 and answer *Unetaneh Tokef's* question of 'who shall die by hunger?' with the words, 'fewer people than last year, because we did not turn aside from our responsibility to each other.' That statement will surely be "*Unetaneh tokef kedushat hayom*," – our way of observing the "mighty holiness" of this day." Of creating a world where brothers and sisters trek across their fields, unasked in the middle of the night and during the light of day, to bring one another the resources they need. When that is our goal, we will be able to bring to the world the true blessing and holiness that it needs. *Shanah Tovah*, may it be a year of blessing and plenty for all.