

Their Accountability, Our Responsibility
Yom Kippur Talk 5769
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On Rosh Hashannah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, how many shall pass on, how many shall come to be, who shall live and who shall die, who shall dwell in peace and who is uprooted, whose life is tranquil and who's is tormented, who shall be poor and who shall be rich, who shall be humbled and who shall be raised up.

As familiar as these words are, they remain powerful year after year as we encounter them at this High Holy Day season. For me as for many of us, they are not to be taken literally to mean that a person's fate for the coming year is somehow decided during these ten days of repentance.

But even metaphorically, they invoke the reality that we simply do not know what the future will bring, and they push us to think clearly about what our priorities should be given that stark truth. We often relate to these lines on a very personal level, and we imagine the unpredictable ups and downs that will invariably come our way as we move around the circle of the calendar. But we all know that this understanding applies equally to groups, even to groups as large as a country or a planet.

One year ago as we recited these same lines, few if any could have guessed at the depth of economic turmoil into which our nation and our world were going to sink. While the year began in the context of fairly low expectations due to a sluggish economy, it looked at one point in the spring as if we had turned a corner and things might actually be headed back in a positive direction. And then, the bottom dropped out, as we saw in the span of just a few months, the failure and near-failure of powerful public and private financial institutions long considered to be the bedrock of our national economic life. The list is already too familiar: Fanny May and Freddie Mac, Bear Sterns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, Wachovia, A.I.G., Washington Mutual and the list may yet increase.

The current economic meltdown, which has widely drawn comparisons to the crash of 1929, has been a constant focus all across the news media for the past several weeks and has even overtaken the presidential election as the number one item on the minds of the American public, if not the world as a whole. This economic crisis has brought in its wake a tremendous amount of confusion, uncertainty, anger and fear. There may have been a few analysts who had the insight to see what was coming, but for the vast majority of lay people and even for many experts, it appears that the breadth and severity of this situation caught us completely off guard.

The primary public reaction has involved an attempt to get a clearer grasp on the economic dynamics that have brought this situation into being, followed closely by a deep desire to identify the guilty party or parties and hold them accountable for this

catastrophe. The problem is that there has been no shortage of candidates who could be implicated in this debacle.

The range of suspects runs the gamut from lending institutions to investment banks, from Wall Street investors to credit rating agencies and on to the Congressional and Executive branches of our Federal government. There are also some who assign the lion's share of the blame to those who purchased homes which were clearly beyond their means to afford.

While we were still in the midst of trying to untangle that complicated question, our national political leadership began to craft and debate proposed remedies to the crisis, and we found ourselves confronted with a $\frac{3}{4}$ of a trillion dollar bailout package that was mostly aimed at the troubled financial sector on Wall Street. We wondered if this was simply the best of a list of bad solutions, or if it represented still another example of a group of powerful decision makers choosing a path that had more to do with the well being of a few economic giants than with the well being of the vast majority of American citizens.

Many of us were reluctantly pulled towards supporting this measure even though it offended our sense of justice. We simply felt an almost primal need to do whatever was necessary to help steady our wavering economy.

In the face of all of this anger, confusion and ambivalence, I believe that it is critically important to recognize that wrapped up within this economic crisis there is also a spiritual crisis taking place. In this respect, we can see a parallel between our experience of the past couple of months and our experience at the time of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Even as the attacks generated political, military, diplomatic and economic ripples throughout our country and around the world, there was a clear and striking spiritual dimension to that crisis as well.

The core of the spiritual crisis, then as now, grows out of our confrontation with the reality that our society and our perceived way of life is much more vulnerable than we like to imagine. We must come to grips with the fact that the foundation of our economic system, upon which all of our social, cultural and political life is based, has turned out to be made of sandstone rather than the granite we believed it to be.

And we must also grapple with a sense of betrayal that we feel in the face of discovering that the financial and political leaders of our country were involved with practices in which they should have known better than to engage.

Given these spiritual challenges on a national if not a global scale, we within the Jewish community are actually quite fortunate to be in the midst of our calendar's most sacred season as this crisis has unfolded. Against this backdrop of economic upheaval, the themes of the High Holy Days come into sharper focus, and we can also draw upon the resources they contain to help us maintain inner balance and perspective as we continue to move forward through this period of concern and uncertainty.

One such resource is the simple but powerful High Holy day message that grows out of the fact that the major confessional prayers of Yom Kippur are recited in the plural rather than the singular voice. Over the years, there have been many Jewish thinkers who have commented on the implications of this linguistic curiosity.

Contemporary rabbi and social activist Michael Lerner has this to say: “On the Jewish High Holidays, we take collective responsibility for our lives and for the activities of the community of which we are a part. Although we realize that we did not create the world into which we are born, we nevertheless have responsibility for what it is like as long as we participate in it.

Another contemporary perspective comes from a Reconstructionist colleague Rabbi Caryn Broitman: “The soul reckoning that we do on Yom Kippur is communal. We are all implicated in the personal acts, good or bad, of any individual in our community. The communal issue is not shame or guilt, it is instead responsibility. And that is ultimately collective, for wrongs are perpetrated and perpetuated only with the consent of the many, even if that consent is passive.”

While these comments were both penned within the last decade, they represent a value that goes back much farther in our tradition. Listen to the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel whose thinking was nurtured in the Hasidic dynasties of pre-holocaust Eastern Europe and who drew heavily upon the example of the biblical prophets in his teaching about the making of a moral society.

He wrote:

“Above all, the prophets remind us of the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible. If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the spirit of society, an individual’s crime discloses society’s corruption. In a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, continually concerned for God and every human being, crime would be infrequent rather than common.” Rabbi Heschel was even willing to apply this high standard of collective responsibility to the rise of Nazi Germany. He did not flinch from calling the Western governments to account for their role in creating the conditions that allowed Nazism to take root and grow.

What all of these reflections have in common is that they call on us to take a step back from our anger towards those who may be the most culpable for the current mess our economy is in and from our resentment towards those who, in their attempt to respond to this crisis, have put together a piece of legislation that is clearly far from perfect.

They ask us to reflect on ways in which we may have lent our support to a dynamic in our economic system that has now been exposed for the poison it contains. They ask us to become aware of how we may have benefited from the way in which things were set up before the bubble burst.

Another contemporary Jewish thinker, Rabbi Irwin Kula, puts these ideas in very direct terms. He argues that “no spiritual insight is required to know that the moral failure that has led to our present crisis is as old as human beings - in a word, it is GREED, but it would be far too easy for any "us" to simply blame some other "them" and thereby deflect and project our responsibility on someone else.” He goes on to list the many ways that our economic system permitted greed to expand and become the driver of a critical sector of the national financial structure, and then he concludes with the following observation:

“Yes, there has been serious moral failure that has led to this economic wreckage, and moral failure requires accountability. But accountability must begin with ourselves and only then can we legitimately extend it outwards to those who are in fact more culpable. So let's start to rebuild that which has been eroded by the age old vice of greed. Not by descending into a blame game but by each of us seriously asking ourselves three simple moral questions:

What did I do to help get us to this place?

What do I need to change with regard to my own behavior?

What can I do to help the most vulnerable of my fellow citizens - those who more hurt and vulnerable than I am ?

These are questions that are grounded in the spiritual perspective of the Yom Kippur prayers; these prayers that constantly remind us that what each one of us does affects the rest of us, whether we know it or not and whether we like it or not.

These prayers that confront us with the truth that things will get better in our society and our world directly proportional to the degree that we, all of us, are willing to be part of making that change happen. These prayers that cajole us into acting on the understanding that while we cannot control what the future may bring, we can nonetheless have some influence on it.

May we all find ways of helping one another to remain resilient through the challenges that may yet remain and in doing so may we all be sealed for a good and a sweet new year.

Good Yuntif and Shannah tovah!