

Shabbat Shalom friends -

I'd like to introduce you to the long-standing rabbinic custom that you've likely experienced but never identified. This is the Shabbat (and often next Shabbat, and perhaps last Shabbat, too!).... when congregational rabbis give a sneak preview of their high holy day sermons. ;)

This is not because there is nothing else to say on these weeks, but because we are truly so immersed in our High Holy Day preparations that we find those topics popping up over and over again.

So this morning I'll give you a preview of one of my holiday sermon topics - I promise the actual sermon will be better, both because it will be written and edited! and because I hope, that through our conversation today, you'll help sharpen the message.

Since the end of the 5780 holiday season, I've had it in mind that I wanted to speak about tzedakah and our giving practices this coming holiday season. In particular, I'm very interested in our communal giving practices and have a couple of theories to float.

But first, let's talk about why we give tzedakah. If we were all in-person, rather than on Zoom, I'd ask you to share with the community why you give tzedakah. I imagine that some of your answers might be: because the Torah tells us to, because we learned from our parents to give tzedakah, because it's the right thing to do, or because when we see someone in need, we cannot not help them.

And those are all wonderful answers. But today's Torah reading gives us another answer.

Ki Tavo says that when we come into the Land of Israel, we have three rituals that we, as individuals and the community, must enact. The first ritual is one that you might be familiar with from the Passover seder. Once we are in the land and settled enough to have had a harvest, we must bring the first fruits to the altar and then recite a specific text that forms the basis of the Haggadah. We'll come back to this text in a moment.

The next ritual is that of tithing. Once every three years, we should give a tithe, or 10%, of our fields' yield to the Levite, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. In other words, we support the vulnerable members of our society.

And the third ritual is the pronouncement, from two mountain tops, of the curses and blessings that God promises to rain down upon us if we do or do not follow God's laws. This one is a bit less relevant to our conversation today, except to say that its place here in the text serves as one last push to do what God wants us to do.

So let's come back to the text that we pronounce when we bring the first fruits to the altar. Deuteronomy 26:5

<p>ה וְעֲנִיתָ וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ. אָרָמִי אָבִד אָבִי, וַיֵּרֵד מִצְרַיִמָּה, וַיֵּגֶר שָׁם בְּמִתֵּי מִעֹט; וַיְהִי-שָׁם, לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל עָצוּם וְרָב.</p>	<p>5 And thou shalt speak and say before the LORD thy God: 'A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there, few in number; and he became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous.</p>
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<p>ו וַיִּרְעוּ אֶתְנוּ הַמִּצְרִים, וַיַּעֲנוּנוּ; וַיִּתְּנוּ עֲלֵינוּ, עֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה.</p>	<p>6 And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage.</p>
<p>ז וַנִּצְעַק, אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ; וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת-קִלְנוֹ, וַיִּרְא אֶת-עֲנִינּוֹ וְאֶת-עֲמָלָנוּ וְאֶת-לַחְצָנוּ.</p>	<p>7 And we cried unto the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression.</p>
<p>ח וַיּוֹצֵאנוּ ה', מִמִּצְרַיִם, בְּיַד חֲזָקָה וּבְזֵרַע נְטוּיָה, וּבְמָרָא גָדֹל--וּבְאֹתוֹת, וּבְמִפְתֵּיִם.</p>	<p>8 And the LORD brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders.</p>
<p>ט וַיְבִיאנוּ, אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה; וַיִּתֵּן-לָנוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת, אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ.</p>	<p>9 And He hath brought us into this place, and hath given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.</p>
<p>י וְעַתָּה, הִנֵּה הֵבִאתִי אֶת-רֵאשִׁית פְּרֵי הָאָדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר-נָתַתָּה לִּי, ה'; וְהִנְחֹתוּ, לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתָ, לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ.</p>	<p>10 And now, behold, I have brought the first of the fruit of the land, which Thou, O LORD, hast given me.' And thou shalt set it down before the LORD thy God, and worship before the LORD thy God.</p>

This memory, this experience of being slaves in Egypt, is inextricably tied to our gift of the first fruits. The text glosses over everything that happened between God bringing us out of slavery and these fruits because it sees the two as one train of thought. That I have these fruits to share is only because God brought me out of Egypt. And if it is not clear through the action and the pronouncement that we are giving out of gratitude and a sense of our history, the Torah hammers the point home with the next obligation to share a 10th of our crops with people who depend on others for their survival.

We give tzedakah for all of the reasons that you might think, and because deep in our souls, we remember what it was like to be oppressed and to be dependent on acts of kindness and charity of others. So we do for others what we needed them to do for us.

So with that said, I have two theories to float - and I'd love to hear your thoughts, after the service is over, by email or phone this week, or any other way you want to share your reactions.

Theory one - this one is probably more easily proved or disproved - that the wealthier and better off we are, or more specifically, the more privileged we are and the further away from experiencing (first hand) the profound sense of instability, food insecurity and financial vulnerability, the less we give to tzedakah. I'm guessing that the opposite is often true too - the closer we are to an experience of hardship, the more gratitude we feel towards the current situation, and thus the more we are willing to help others.

And theory two - with the advent of internet banking and virtual fundraising campaigns, we give more often than previous generations, but do a worse job of teaching our children to give tzedakah.

I imagine that, like me, many of you learned to give tzedakah by watching your parents do it. Whereas 30 years ago, tzedakah might have been given in the form of writing checks at the kitchen table, now we click through on our personal devices and give whenever we notice a cause that tugs at our heartstrings. It likely happens more often than it did before, but by doing it on

our phones or computers, at all hours of the day, the next generation isn't watching. Essentially, we might be giving far more often than families did 30 years ago, but we're basically doing it in secret.

So, if my guesses are accurate, as the memory of our immigrant days in America fades further and further away - and our children no longer watch us giving tzedakah, even as we continue to donate - I suspect we will find our community's level of generosity will decrease. Unless, of course, we make a concerted effort to change course.

And that is what these two rituals aim to do. By needing to announce our history, by sharing the "why" when we offer our first fruits and by paying attention to ensure that we actually give away an entire tenth of our worth every three years, we are fulfilling two important pieces of giving tzedakah: the actual giving itself AND teaching our children to give.

So I challenge you to do two hard things this week:

1. Start with a little math and compare how much tzedakah you typically give in a year to what the Torah is asking us to do. How far off are you? Can you get a little closer to the goal? (And you'll note that here the Torah says you give a tenth once every 3 years - so if you're nowhere near the 10% number, it would be reasonable to think about giving about 3% of our income to charity each year).
2. Talk to someone about their, and your, giving habits. That our phones make giving SO much easier is wonderful. But let's also take it out into the open. We could learn a lot from one another. What are the causes and institutions that you believe in so deeply that you financially support? How do you decide how much to give? In what ways are you modeling for your children or grandchildren the value of generosity and sharing?

Back in the days before COVID, Zoom, and social distancing, when we could still meet in person over kiddish lunch, I had wanted to make generosity a theme for us to explore together over the course of the year - with speakers, learning sessions, books, and conversations. With so much taking our focus in other directions right now, I understand that that vision isn't going to come to fruition the way I was dreaming about. But this year, in particular, needs to be a year of generosity and giving. And what better time to start than the month of Elul?