IS THIS THE FAST I HAVE CHOSEN?...The call to fight hunger in our midst!

Rabbi Mara S. Nathan

Our Torah portion and Haftarah for Yom Kippur are all about social responsibility. Nitzavim which Joanie Silbergleit & Lee Perlman will chant in just a little bit tells us that fulfilling God’s commandments is an attainable goal and that our lives will be filled with blessing if we ‘choose life.’ BUT if we are unwilling to commit ourselves and ‘turn away’ from God we will surely perish.

Our Haftarah takes up this last sentiment, as the Prophet Isaiah not only encourages us to live a life filled with social justice and awareness but relays God’s frustration, some might say disgust with us...for saying we will choose life, but then not doing much to make it so.

If today is truly the day of atonement when we take an account of our shortcomings from the past year, our Haftarah is here to remind us that if we come back next year having made no progress in our work to heal the world, then a day of fasting and atonement is not only a waste of time but an utter farce. (Isaiah does not mince words.)

Here the opening words of our Haftarah text:

ISAIAH 58:1-7...¹Cry aloud, do not hold back, let your voice resound like a Shofar: declare to My people their transgression and to the house of Jacob their sin. ²Yes, they seek Me daily, as though eager to learn My ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right, and has not forsaken the teachings of its God. ³They ask of Me the right way, as though eager for the nearness of God. ‘When we fast,’ you say, ‘why do You pay no heed? Why, when we afflict ourselves, do You take no notice?’ ⁴Because on your fast day you think only of your business, and oppress all your workers! Because your fasting leads only to strife and discord, and hitting out with cruel fist! Such a way of fasting on this day will not help you to be heard on high. ⁵Is this the fast I desire? A day for me to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to Adonai? ⁶No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. ⁷It 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.

Why this text especially for Yom Kippur? R’ Edward Feld, editor of the Machzor Lev SHalam the conservative movements new HHday prayer book shares the obvious connection:

RABBI EDWARD FELD...God tells the prophet to be like a shofar in trumpeting the people’s misdeeds, and in calling upon them to care for those in need. The mention both of shofar and of fasting (v.3) verbally links this Haftarah with Yom Kippur.

(Machzor Lev Shalem, p. 285)

But its more than that! I always find the prophets so difficult to relate to not only because of their poetic biblical language but because they are such nags!!! I consistently feel like the prophets were the original stereotypical Jewish Mother, always bringing up our inadequacies,
letting us know how we’ve let them and God down, constantly reminding us that we should do and know better! But on today of all days….it’s what we need to hear.

And if read closely, it’s not too hard to find a disheartening modern connection to Isaiah’s ancient words. This is our moment to think about our actions (or lack thereof) when it comes to our relationship with God and our friends and family, but also our awareness and responsibility to the greater world we live in.

As Rabbi Ilana Berenbaum Grinblat teacher of Midrash at the American Jewish University’s, Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in LA explains:

RABBI ILANA BERENBAUM GRINBLAT...Each year on Yom Kippur, we are forced to ask one question of ourselves. What does God want? This piercing question haunts the Yom Kippur morning haftarah like a shofar call. In Isaiah 58, God shows the prophet that the people are fulfilling ritual precepts while neglecting our tradition’s moral foundation....God asserts that prayers and sacrifice are meaningless “because on your fast day you pursue your own affairs and you oppress your workers” (58:2-3). The people have failed to “share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless unto your home” (58:7). Such moral lapses call into question the whole religious enterprise. God tells Isaiah to “raise your voice like a shofar’s blast” (58:1) and articulate the central question: “Is this the fast that I have chosen?” If rituals are followed in the absence of moral precepts, is God satisfied? (The Women’s Haftarah Commentary, p.308)

It’s not an especially nuanced Haftarah Text. Nor does it need to be. If we don’t protect those who are most vulnerable in our midst....what’s the point? If we can’t make sure every person around us is fed, then we are wasting our time at Temple today.

The Torah and Jewish tradition are explicit in the command that we feed the hungry and help eradicate hunger from our society. As Maimonides…the Rambam teaches:

RAMBAM...If a stranger comes and says, “I am hungry. Please give me food,” we are not allowed to check to see if he is honest or not. We must immediately give him food.” [Mishneh Torah 6:6]

Not only do we have our Haftarah from Isaiah, but the Torah text including Leviticus 23:22 tells us about leaving the edges of our fields and the gleanings of the harvest for the poor and stranger to collect.

And even though most of us are not agriculturist anymore, we can translate this command into regular donations to food pantries and soup kitchens as well as supporting private organizations that work to eradicate hunger in our country and throughout the world. Unfortunately, these are not efforts that individuals, or even excellent non for profit
organizations can take on by themselves. Too many people unnecessarily go hungry every day, even in our own community. Food drives like our own bountiful Yom Kippur effort make a difference but they are not enough. And of course ‘food insecurity’ as it is officially known is as much about empty refrigerators and bellies as it is about economic conditions, the social divide and bureaucratic red tape that plague our less than perfect world.

**WHAT IS “FOOD INSECURITY”?** The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a lack of access at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life.

As a working parent I have embraced Fresh Direct which is an online grocery service. I order food almost every week. It’s convenient, fresh and fairly reliable. In a typical week I charge somewhere between $220 and $280 to feed my family of five. That in addition to a few trips to DeCiccos, Trader Joes and maybe Lords Farm not to mention Saturday night dinners out, weekend lunches at Sal’s with the kids (and pizza day at school), several lunches picked up along the way during the work week. And I bet we spend somewhere around $500-$600 on food each week.

I don’t really ever think about prices at the super market, though of course I try to stock up when there is a special on a family favorite. There has never once been a time in my life that I have had to worry about getting enough to eat. Were that the case for every American….even every New Yorker.

Here are some National facts about food insecurity in America.

**THE FACTS**

- 48.8 million Americans struggle to put enough nutritious food on the table.
- Over 20 million children receive free or reduced-price lunch each school day. Less than half of them get breakfast and only 10 percent have access to summer feeding sites. (RAC.org)
- 40 percent of food is thrown out in the US every year, or about $165 billion worth. All of this uneaten food could feed 25 million Americans. (RAC.org)
- Half of all children growing up in the United States will at one point in their childhood be on food assistance (RAC.org)
- Hunger is not just a problem that affects the unemployed; nearly 20% of Canadian food bank users report income from current or recent employment. (Mazon.org)

For those who struggle to make ends meet deciding to buy a few pieces of fruit or an entire case of ramen noodles; choosing between the electric bill and food for the family, trading off between medication and groceries...our land of plenty...is most certainly not... (mazon.org)

And it’s not to say that we as a Jewish community haven’t joined with other faith based groups
and non for profits to heed Isaiah’s call to feed the hungry. It’s just that it’s not enough. This is what MAZON a Jewish Organization committed to educating about and fighting the endemic causes of hunger says:

WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE FOR FOOD INSECURE PEOPLE?
An impressive number of charitable organizations have emerged to try to help hungry people get the food they need to survive. Many of them originated in houses of worship, in response to what was perceived to be a “temporary emergency.” These food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens now play a vital role in the hunger relief community, and they are currently struggling to keep up with unprecedented demand. The USDA has 15 distinct food and nutrition assistance programs to combat domestic hunger. The cornerstone of these programs, which accounts for 72% of all Federal food and nutrition assistance spending, is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly called “food stamps”). SNAP is 100% funded by the USDA, but state agencies administer the program, determine eligibility and allotments, and distribute benefits to qualified recipients. Over 46 million Americans participate in SNAP, which provides, on average, a monthly benefit of $134 per person (about $1.50 per meal per day) (Mazon.org)

$4.50 a day per person? I eat $15-20 worth of food a day and that’s if I don’t buy a meal or 2 out. It’s almost inconceivable, the choices we would have to make if we were limited to less than $5 a day to eat. Unfortunately, these statistics are not especially new, though the # of people relying on SNAP are elevated since the 2009 financial crisis. But what is making this moment in time different from others? The farm bill.

The Farm Bill, which sets much of U.S. food and agriculture policy, is currently making its way through Congress. This major legislation, which is only considered every five years, has a far-ranging impact, from foreign assistance and food safety, to environmental conservation and anti-hunger programs.

This is the moment when Congress considers legislation that will affect if and how millions of Americans keep food on the table. And what will happen is not so clear cut. The fact that SNAP and other anti-hunger legislation are now considered partisan issues is one of major concern. Especially since it has not always been this way.

POLITICS AS USUAL?
DOROTHY SAMUELS... “That hunger and malnutrition should persist in a land such as ours is embarrassing and intolerable,” so declared Richard Nixon in May 1969 in his now widely forgotten “Special Message to the Congress Recommending a Program to End Hunger in America.”...During the 1970s, another Republican leader, Senator Bob Dole of Kansas, forged a partnership with George McGovern....They helped pass legislation to improve the accessibility and antifraud provisions of the food-stamps program....The modern food-stamps program, built with Republican and Democratic support, succeeded in eliminating the most extreme pockets of hunger in parts of the country....Today, the program remains an immensely important source
of support for low-income families and children living below or near the poverty line. Still, some 50 million Americans live in households that cannot consistently afford enough food, even with the food-stamps program, (SNAP). Come November, temporary increases for food-stamp aid approved in the 2009 economic recovery act are scheduled to expire, which would result in a loss of about $25 in monthly food stamps for a family of four. The House bill cuts would end food-stamp assistance for nearly two million people, with the pain falling mainly on low-income working families with kids and older Americans, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. And as many as 210,000 children would lose access to free school lunches and breakfasts because their eligibility for those meals is tied to their family’s receipt of food-stamp benefits. If anything, Washington should be allocating more money to address tremendous unmet needs.

(There was a Time When Ending Hunger was a National Goal for Republicans and Democrats, NYT, 5/20/2013)

The federal budget is tight and the national deficit looming but this is not the fault of the working poor and unemployed members of our society. Cutting SNAP will have a damaging effect on real families, with the majority of SNAP benefits helping families with children, seniors and people with disabilities. Whatever your politics are to the left or the right I think we can all agree that every human being deserves to have sufficient nutrition. Without it, it is unlikely that the most vulnerable members of our society will ever find a way to greater self-sufficiency. As a western democracy shouldn’t we be obligated to project our most vulnerable citizens?

JARED BERNSTEIN...Though the economy is clearly improving, we’ve yet to fully escape the gravitation pull of the great recession. The job market remains weak, and wages and middle-class incomes remaining stagnant. But we’re on the mend, and the likelihood of slipping back into recession is low....[if] the recession is receding, shouldn’t the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, (SNAP) roles be coming down as well?...Though their growth has decelerated, SNAP rolls remained elevated because their function remains crucial in what’s still a tough job market for low-income households....I am not suggesting we celebrate elevated SNAP Rolls. Their height is evidence that the economy remains too weak for eligible households to afford adequate nutrition and that our current economic policy agenda isn’t doing enough to offset that weakness. But the fact is that markets fail, and when they do, income and food supports must rise to protect the most economically vulnerable families. So let’s get this straight: the poor and their advocates were not the ones who tanked the economy. Nor should they be on the defensive when the safety net expands to offset some of the damage. The right question at such times is thus not why the SNAP rolls are so high. It’s whether SNAP, unemployment insurance, T.A.N.F. et al are expanding adequately to meet the needs of the poor.


Mazon: A Jewish response to Hunger is an organization we at Larchmont Temple have worked with and supported for decades. They have launched a dramatic educational photography exhibit to dispel the myths of hunger in America. They call it “The New Face of Hunger.”
Explaining: The “face” of hunger is changing as middle class families drop into the ranks of poverty and hunger. MAZON feels compelled to address this growing issue by educating the Jewish community and others about the “new” face of hunger and rallying synagogues and individuals to advocate on behalf of the millions of Americans who face hunger daily. The New Face of Hunger offers a unique view into the world of hunger.

MAZON presented the project with an opening night showcase gala in Los Angeles and is hoping the exhibit will travel to synagogues, museums or community centers across the country to further educate the Jewish and secular community about the prevalence of hunger in America. Here is an excerpt from one of these new faces, a young boy in Michigan named John.

THE NEW FACE OF HUNGER (MAZON: A JEWISH RESPONSE TO HUNGER)
“I feel bad when my mom tries to buy me some food and I say, ‘Mom if you’re not getting yourself something than I’m not getting anything.’ And she says, ‘Yes you are.’ And I say, ‘No I’m not.’ It makes me feel sad that my parents sometimes feed us kids and not themselves. But it makes me feel happy that they care so much about my brother and me. I’m ten years old, and at about my age, kids want to help care for their family a little bit more…. My mom is really struggling to get a job. She wants that feeling she gets when she comes home with a paycheck and can afford to feed us and get us some things that we want. My dad is disabled and can’t work a regular job anymore. To pull together some money, we go out and find some scrap metal and sell it to the junkyard for maybe a hundred bucks a load. There was a period, before we got food stamps, when I was so hungry that it hurt a little bit in my stomach and kind of made me out of breath. I didn’t tell my friends about our situation. It was a private thing. I got really bad grades in school then, and I was used to getting good grades. If I’m hungry in school, I can’t focus a lot and I don’t understand the lesson. I’m glad that the school I’m in now can provide us breakfast because you need breakfast to get you going in the morning….when I don’t eat in the morning, it makes me drowsy, and I stare off in space just thinking about lunch. If I didn’t get school lunches, I’d be a little disappointed because I might not have enough to eat. My life changed when we got on food stamps, [but it isn’t] enough to feed four people for a month, so I’m always excited to go to the food bank. Sometimes there are things I really like and sometimes not so much. I think we are going to have a good life again. When that happens, I’m gonna help hungry people out, like invite them to dinner and give them some food to take home. I will be excited when my mom gets a job. Then we will be good to go and have some extra money to do some of the stuff that we haven’t been able to do…. (John, Canton Michigan) (Mazon.org)

So, beyond giving to our food drive what can you do? You can support Mazon and the CAP center and other hunger based charities. You can educate yourself and you can take action by contacting our members of congress and urge them to oppose cuts to SNAP in the Farm Bill negotiations and any budget deal. If you text FAST to 877-877 you’ll get information from the
Religious Action Center about how to do this and get some further information about the issue as well.

On Yom Kippur we fast to free ourselves from our daily needs. This allows us the time we need to concentrate on the tasks at hand on this holy day: As we refrain from pleasure and deny our bodies nourishment, we hope to draw ourselves closer to God.

This is one day. Being hungry on a regular basis can be all consuming and distracting not only cutting down on productivity but impacting physical, intellectual and emotional health.

As this day carries on, and our stomachs begin to really grumble, let those pangs of hunger inspire us to fulfill our commitment to the poor and hungry, choosing life for ourselves and those less fortunate around us. Let our Torah and Haftarah readings for today make their point in a tangible life changing way. We can make a difference and Share our bread with the hungry.
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**FOOD INSECURITY...An Unintentional Fast**

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