

KN – 5772 – Feed the Hungry, Clothe the Naked

What are you personally willing to do about poverty, hunger and homelessness? From my interactions with people who lived through the Great Depression, it seemed to me that they never forgot that experience and it affected their whole lives. For the majority of us who recently experienced the stock market crash and recession of 2007-09, we are not likely to forget it any time soon. But how do these kinds of events impact our perspective: do we turn inward and look only to protect ourselves and our loved ones, or do we recognize a responsibility to act on behalf of the larger society?

I do not know how many of you know or remember Norman Borlaug. According to Jeff Jacoby who wrote about Borlaug in an article that appeared in The Boston Globe days after he died in September 2009, “Borlaug grew up on a farm in northern Iowa, and experienced the hardships of the Depression and the terrible “Dust Bowl” drought that devastated much of the Midwest. [Borlaug said in later life] The sight of Americans suffering from hunger ‘left an indelible imprint on me,’ ... and instilled in him a smoldering “hatred against hunger and misery and human poverty.” That hatred eventually drew him to the study of plant pathology, and to the crucial insight that unleashed the Green Revolution.

After receiving his PhD in plant pathology and genetics, “he took up an agricultural research position in Mexico, where he developed semi-dwarf, high-yield, disease-resistant wheat varieties. (WK)

According to Jeff Jacoby’s tribute, “Borlaug was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Medal of Science, and the Congressional Gold Medal. Scores of universities conferred honorary degrees upon him. Research institutions and facilities on

three continents were named after him. He was greatly honored, and for good reason: He is reckoned to have saved more lives - hundreds of millions, perhaps a billion -- than any man in human history.”

It’s easy to sit here tonight and say, “what am I, an individual, really able to do?” But with the tragic death of Steve Jobs the other day, I want to remind you of one of Apple’s advertising lines which doubtless represents him: “Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do. - Apple Inc.”

And we should remember that Judaism is a tradition that believes every human being is a world and when we have a positive effect on one person, it is as though we are saving a world. Sometimes we just need to be a little creative in the ways we reach out to help others in need, like in the story “The Three Red Marbles” by W. E. Petersen which first appeared in the October 1975 *Ensign Magazine*.

“One day Mr. Miller was bagging some early potatoes for me. I noticed a small boy, delicate of bone and feature, ragged but clean, hungrily appraising a basket of freshly picked green peas.

I paid for my potatoes but was also drawn to the display of fresh green peas.

I am a pushover for creamed peas and new potatoes.

Pondering the peas, I couldn’t help overhearing the conversation between Mr. Miller (the store owner) and the ragged boy next to me.

‘Hello Barry, how are you today?’

‘H’lo , Mr. Miller. Fine, thank ya. Jus’ admirin’ them peas. They sure look good.’ ‘They are good, Barry. How’s your Ma?’

‘Fine. Gittin’ stronger alla’ time.’

‘Good. Anything I can help you with?’

‘No, Sir. Jus’ admirin’ them peas.’

‘Would you like to take some home ?’ asked Mr. Miller.

‘No, Sir. Got nuthin’ to pay for ‘em with.’

‘Well, what have you to trade me for some of those peas?’

‘All I got’s my prize marble here.’

‘Is that right? Let me see it’ said Miller..

‘Here ‘tis. She’s a dandy.’

‘I can see that. Hmmmmm, only thing is this one is blue and I sort of go for red. Do you have a red one like this at home ? ‘ the store owner asked.

‘Not zackley but almost.’

‘Tell you what. Take this sack of peas home with you and next trip this way let me look at that red marble.’ Mr. Miller told the boy.

‘Sure will. Thanks Mr. Miller.’

Mrs. Miller, who had been standing nearby, came over to help me. With a smile she said, ‘There are two other boys like him in our community, all three are in very poor circumstances. Jim just loves to bargain with them for peas, apples, tomatoes, or whatever. When they come back with their red marbles, and they always do, he decides he doesn’t like red after all and he sends them home with a bag of produce for a green marble or an orange one, when they come on their next trip to the store..’

I left the store smiling to myself, impressed with this man. A short time later I moved to Colorado, but I never forgot the story of this man, the boys, and their bartering for marbles.

Several years went by, each more rapid than the previous one. Just recently I had occasion to visit some old friends in that Idaho community and while I was there learned that Mr. Miller had died.

They were having his visitation that evening and knowing my friends wanted to go, I agreed to accompany them. Upon arrival at the mortuary we

fell into line to meet the relatives of the deceased and to offer whatever words of comfort we could.

Ahead of us in line were three young men. One was in an army uniform and the other two wore nice haircuts, dark suits and white shirts all very professional looking. They approached Mrs. Miller, standing composed and smiling by her husband's casket. Each of the young men hugged her, kissed her on the cheek, spoke briefly with her, and moved on to the casket. Her misty light blue eyes followed them as, one by one; each young man stopped briefly and placed his own warm hand over the cold pale hand in the casket. Each left the mortuary awkwardly, wiping his eyes.

Our turn came to meet Mrs. Miller. I told her who I was and reminded her of the story from those many years ago and what she had told me about her husband's bartering for marbles. With her eyes glistening, she took my hand and led me to the casket.

'Those three young men who just left were the boys I told you about. They just told me how they appreciated the things Jim 'traded' them. Now, at last, when Jim could not change his mind about color or size they came to pay their debt.'...

With loving gentleness she lifted the lifeless fingers of her deceased husband. Resting underneath were three exquisitely shined red marbles."

Why should we be thinking about the poor, the hungry and homeless on Yom Kippur, especially if they are strangers to us, people whom we have not offended in any direct fashion? Because for those who think Yom Kippur is just about fasting and praying, please pay attention to the words of Isaiah from tomorrow morning's haftarah. (Pg. 499-501) "Is this the fast that I have chosen? Is this affliction of the soul? Is it to drop your head like a

bulrush, to grovel in sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call fasting, a fast that the Lord would accept?

This is My chosen fast: to loosen all the bonds that bind men unfairly, to let the oppressed go free, to break every yoke. Share your bread with the hungry, take the homeless into your home. Clothe the naked when you see him, do not turn away from people in need.” Project Isaiah, our food collection program, is aptly named.

A few weeks ago, I asked Alan Jennings, the Executive Director of the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley to send me an evaluation of the current needs in the Lehigh Valley. Alan Jennings is one of the most knowledgeable people in this area about those in need. He wrote: "The 'Great Recession' is, for many people, still a recession. The 'recovery' is shallow, at best. And the damage of that recession has long-term implications like only one or two others over the past century.... The problem is that access to credit is stymied by a foreclosure crisis that made almost all real-estate-related equity evaporate....

And long-term unemployment has its own implications: besides less money to buy things that stimulate the economy, savings are spent and the cushion is gone. People don't have the money to improve their homes, further diminishing property values, causing blight, weakening the tax base. On top of all of that, the economic anxiety all of this is causing is turning working people against each other. A mean spirit is consuming what once was civil society.

The question for all of us, especially people of faith, is the question of how we make this right. Is the American Century over? Can we recover as a nation?"

What is happening to us as a nation? CNN recently reported that: “As the Occupy Wall Street protesters rally for a third week, [which has now reached about 22 days] social media sites such as Twitter seem to be spurring similar protests in other cities....

In New York, several unions endorsed the Occupy Wall Street movement and plan to join the protesters' street theater.... labor leaders said.

Larry Hanley, international president of the Amalgamated Transit Union, which has 20,000 members in the New York area [said]:

"These young people are speaking for the vast majority of Americans who are frustrated by the bankers and brokers who have profited on the backs of hard-working people," Hanley added in a statement. "While we battle it out day after day, month after month, the millionaires and billionaires on Wall Street sit by -- untouched -- and lecture us on the level of our sacrifice."

Transport Workers Union Local 100 spokesman Jim Gannon said the Occupy Wall Street movement ... denounces social inequities in the financial system and draws inspiration from the Arab Spring revolutions..." I hope these young Americans have a better, clearer road map to success than seems to be emerging from the Arab Spring. But one point is obvious: there are many Americans, certainly young ones, but truly of all ages, who have been negatively impacted by the economy and if they do not know how to correct it, they will at least protest the current course of response.

Several rabbis and cantors met with Alan Jennings this past winter to learn more about the Community Action Committee's activities and what we might do. Alan impressed me with his call for prophetic vision, for an Isaiah like response. The national deficit has only made matters worse since then. I also asked Alan to reflect on what he thought the Lehigh Valley Jewish community might do at this time. He responded in part:

“The Lehigh Valley's Jewish community has much to offer,... Having faced and largely overcome centuries of oppression, Jews have a special ability to confront the ignorance, intolerance, short-sightedness and greed that seems so pervasive in our society today.

Let's explore the problems in our community, the kinds of responses that might be appropriate, and whether we are going to let our own comfortable lifestyles and maybe even cynicism obstruct our ages-old pursuit of justice.”

Alan Jennings wants us, the Jewish community, to be stronger advocates for the poor, to raise our voices with the government at various levels, to protest the budget cuts that impact the lives of those in need. I told Alan candidly that he may be thinking of a Jewish community that no longer exists. We may not be as large, as influential, as wealthy or as liberal as we once were. But advocacy for the poor is surely a topic that deserves our attention and merits a communal discussion.

One doesn't need the expertise of Alan Jennings to know that more people are going to soup kitchens and food banks in the Lehigh Valley. We know that there is now a working poor; full time employees who still qualify for food stamps. I think Alan has raised an important issue for us. As the descendents of Isaiah and a prophetic tradition that focused much attention on the poor, widows and orphans and the weakest members of society, are we too much focused today on our own stock portfolios, pensions and savings?

We need members of the community to enter the public discussion of the economic crisis before the meanness of spirit which Alan Jennings named turns to violence, or perhaps it would be accurate to say, to more widespread violence.

There is a danger in being concerned too much with our own comfort when so many around us are hurting. Yom Kippur is very much about evaluating ourselves **and** reaching out to others. Fasting should never be an end in itself, but a prod to sensitize us to those who are forced into a kind of fast every day. Whether we can help billions, millions, or just one person, Isaiah would say that we at least have to try. May we begin to do so in the year ahead.

AMEN