

Kol Nidre Tzedakah Appeal  
JCC October 7, 2011  
Rabbi Ed Elkin

Greetings. It's a great honour for me to be here this Erev Yom Kippur with our congregation here at the JCC. As you know, the Narayever has services on the High Holy Days both at our shul on Brunswick and here, and for the past many years I've been based at the shul, but have come over here to share some of my thoughts and reflections with our JCC community, led so beautifully by Rabbi Weiss, on Rosh Hashanah. This year, we've managed to carve out this additional opportunity for me to be with you on Yom Kippur as well – and to share some of my thoughts in regard to our annual Kol Nidre tzedakah appeal. It is both a wonderful honour and a heavy burden. It's an honour because I can truly say that of all the things we do as a community, nothing makes me prouder than our commitment each year to use some of this precious time on our holiest day of the year to come together around the value of making the world a better place. It's a heavy burden because so much important work by the organizations we choose to support relies on these funds, and, without having gone to motivational speaker school, I want to choose just the right words that will motivate us all to generosity and serious commitment this evening.

In many ways, this is a new experience for me. I've been speaking to congregations on the High Holy Days for more than 25 years now, starting with my first student pulpit in the hills east of San Diego, and after that in places like Calgary, Montreal, Kingston, Steubenville, OH, and since the year 2000 here in Toronto. Usually on the High Holy Days I reflect on themes that are on my mind concerning Jewish identity or Israel – and I use the opportunity of having so many members of our community gathering together to ask people to consider the meaning and depth of their commitment to our people and its traditions -- in the hope of motivating those present, wherever they may have been on the Jewish path in the year just concluded, to keep moving along that path towards greater Jewish involvement, insight and seriousness. Like most of my colleagues, I see these days as an opportunity to ask you in the year just starting to learn more, participate more, observe more, believe more, repent more. And so I make my speech, and people listen politely, and I even get compliments from time to time. And then people go off after the holiday, back to the usual routines of their lives -- some hopefully having been genuinely touched by what I said, some seeds hopefully having been planted which may bear Jewish fruit someday.

Tonight my task is different. Tonight, in keeping with longstanding Narayever tradition for Erev Yom Kippur, my task is not to ask you to think about something which you might want to consider taking action on at some undetermined point in the future. Rather I'm asking you to do something right now. I'm asking you to take out those cards and fold down those tabs and make as generous a pledge as you possibly can to our Narayever tzedakah campaign for 2011-2012.

Long ago, our congregation made a decision that Yom Kippur will be dedicated at least in part to coming together as a community to share some of what we have with the world outside, so that we can tell both ourselves and others that our having been together on these holy days was about more than just us. It's about more than just saying the prayers, singing the songs, hearing the shofar, reading the Torah – as significant as it is to keep all those traditions and as important as it is to inculcate them in the next generation. Rather, the success of our Yom Kippur appeal means that our coming together on these days in our vast numbers has inspired us to make a difference in the world beyond ourselves, in the world outside this gym, and have an impact as a community in a way that none of us could have as individuals.

Antoine de-Saint Exupery's little prince declared that "if you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea."

Gathering the wood and dividing the work is of course vitally important, and you can't make the world a better place without organizations and committees and people doing the crucial work on the ground. But those folks can't do their holy work without other people who are inspired by the thought of changing the world. That's my task tonight, to inspire you. There are so many people out there doing the work on behalf of the causes we believe in, laboring tirelessly on behalf of NGOs, doing amazing things on the ground to help others and make our world better, kinder, healthier. Tonight I'm asking you to support them, as generously as you can, and to be inspired as you consider that support, by the "vast and endless sea" of change that is possible when people come together as a community in common purpose. We've all read about the social protest demonstrations in Israel this past summer. Those who came out in their hundreds of thousands to those demonstrations in towns and cities across Israel imagined that their society could be different. There are no tents or placards here in this gym, but there are those cards with their tabs and by folding them down you are making a statement that you too yearn for a healthier and more compassionate world.

We have in the past divided the funds raised in our Yom Kippur appeal into three categories – Israel based organizations, Toronto based organizations, and a reserve for emergencies around the world.

I'd like to give you one example in each of these areas of how we have made a difference together in a way that none of us could have accomplished individually. In Israel, our mandate is feeding the hungry and addressing poverty through employment, environmental protection and peace-building. The Arava Institute of Environmental Studies, based at Kibbutz Ketura in Israel's southern desert, is one example of an organization we have supported that addresses both environmental protection and peace-building. AIES hosts students from Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Egypt and the Jewish diaspora – all dedicated to learning about the environmental challenges facing the region and devising solutions to address those challenges. This year, as Israel's relationship with these neighbours continues unfortunately to deteriorate, supporting programs which transcend borders and emphasize common interests is more important than ever. I participated in a five day bike ride from Tel Aviv to Eilat in 2008 to raise funds for the Arava Institute, and on the ride I met many of the students who were then enrolled in the program, and I heard about some of the amazing projects they were working on. In just one example, an Israeli Bedouin young man was working with some of his fellow students on a project designed to make sure the water supply in his community was free of contamination. It was inspiring to see the collaboration among students from different backgrounds, and we can only hope that as the students return to their communities they will be not only effective environmental advocates but also ambassadors of good will for Israel in the region – and I don't need to tell you how little of that good will exists at the moment. This program on its own won't make Mideast peace, but what a meaningful way this has been for our one Diaspora Jewish community to contribute something positive at a time when developments have been so negative.

Locally in Toronto, our mandate is feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless, as well as supporting Jewish community needs in the downtown core. For the downtown Jewish community, we have dedicated some of our Kol Nidre tzedakah funds to subsidize a communal Pesach seder here at the JCC which is attended in part by clients of Jewish Family and Child Services. In regard to feeding the hungry and sheltering the homeless in the wider downtown community, I'd like to tell you about Out of the Cold, a program to help those with nowhere to go during Toronto's bitter winters by providing them with a hot meal, a warm bed, and some basic social services. Narayever has long supported an interfaith Out of the Cold by sending volunteers, but the program also obviously requires funds to keep going. We all hope one day such a program would not be necessary in our community,

but in the meantime we have to live in the real world, which for the most needy and vulnerable among us can be cold in more ways than one. It is inspiring to be able to do our part as a community to help, together with our synagogue and church partners.

In addition to the causes we officially support each year in Israel and Toronto, we set aside a certain amount of the funds we collect in our Kol Nidre appeal for emergencies that often arise in our world. For example, after the devastating earthquake in Haiti last year, we were able to contribute \$5,000 to Veahavta's earthquake relief efforts – again, reinforcing the fact that our coming together as a community on Yom Kippur is about more than just ourselves, but also about taking some of the wonderful energy in here and bringing it to the world outside, helping folks in trouble whom we will likely never meet. I was so proud that we were able to make a meaningful contribution at that time when the need in Haiti was so pressing.

We can only support important causes like these at the level that we'd like, at a level that makes a real impact, if you pledge as generously as you can tonight, both in money and volunteer time.

I've always been impressed by the rabbis' choice of Isaiah 58 as the haftorah for Yom Kippur. The passage is about fasting, so at first glance it seems to be a perfectly obvious choice for this day. But if we look again, we see that the message actually seems rather undermining of the arduous fast the tradition asks us to endure on Yom Kippur. In the passage, the people of Jerusalem complain to the prophet because even though they've been fasting, God doesn't seem to be paying any heed to their fast. They're still being dominated by their enemies. What's God's reply, according to Isaiah? "Is this the fast I choose, a day when man merely afflicts himself? Can it be merely bowing one's head like a bulrush and putting on sackcloth and ashes? Do you call this a fast and a day of favour to Hashem?" I can only imagine the people of Isaiah's time being very perplexed and saying to God, "Well, yeah, this is the fast we thought you wanted, that's why we're doing it, and it's not so easy you know, but it's Your commandment -- so what's the problem?" God's reply is fascinating. No, in fact all these ritual demonstrations of religiosity exemplified by the fast are *not* what God wants. הלא זה צום אבחרהו פתח חרצבות. "This is the fast I choose...to break open the shackles of wickedness, to undo the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free...surely you should break your bread for the hungry, bring the poor to your home; when you see a naked person, clothe him; and do not hide yourself from your kin..."

By choosing this passage to be read on Yom Kippur, the rabbis seem, surprisingly, to be challenging the central observance we ask people to perform on this day, namely the fast. Refraining from eating isn't what God *really* wants, says Isaiah. It's not what it's really about. What God wants is for us to do right by others. That's often even harder. Isaiah wasn't saying don't fast, and neither am I. But by asking us to read his words on this day, on Yom Tzom Kippur, we are being sent a pretty strong message by our tradition. Don't think that by fasting you've "done" Yom Kippur. Don't even think that by attending services you've "done" Yom Kippur. Those things might seem like a lot, like a big sacrifice, and indeed they are hard -- but they're not enough. Yom Kippur is about going *beyond* yourself and repairing your relationship with others in this world and with the world itself. And right here, right now, you can begin observing this real Yom Kippur by folding down your tab as generously as you can.

Rav Kook has a beautiful teaching about something called *Shir HaMeruba*. He says that every Jew has the opportunity and the obligation to sing four songs: *shirat ha-nefesh*, *shirat ha-umah*, *shirat ha-adam*, *ve-shirat ha-olam*. *Shirat Ha-nefesh* is about one's own soul, one's own life; *shirat ha-umah* is about one's nation, the people of Israel; *shirat ha-adam* is about all humanity, and *shirat ha-olam* is about all creation. The people of Isaiah's time made the mistake of thinking that their religious obligations were only about *shirat ha-nefesh*, that it's only about oneself, one's own soul, one's own pain, one's own guilt. If we do *inui nefesh*, afflict ourselves through fasting, they thought, we'll make everything right.

We often make the same mistake. Now Yom Kippur is about our own *nefesh*, there's no doubt. Our very lives are at stake here, says our tradition. But it's also about so much more than us. Using Rav Kook's image, we've got to sing all the other songs during the course of this day as well, and throughout the year. That's not easy, and we may get a bit off balance from time to time, but that's our task, and Yom Kippur is a good time for us to do *heshbon hanefesh*, check in on our own sense of balance among the four songs. Participating in our Kol Nidre appeal helps us to sing some of those other songs, the ones beyond our own *nefesh*, our own lives. Tonight, you can begin building that little prince's ship which will embark, with your help, to a better world. You can begin radiating to the world outside some of the wonderful communal energy you feel in here after the magnificent Kol Nidre we've all just heard rendered by Rabbi Weiss and our choir, by giving generously to the Narayever's annual Kol Nidre appeal.

Thank you.

