

“Kherpat Ra’av: The Shame of Hunger”
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We have spent much time today recounting our sins—and there’s more to come. We’ve recited the *Ashamnu*, we have recited the *Al Heit*. The list of sins goes on and on.

We don’t just recount our sins; we talk about **how it makes us feel** to be guilty of sin. As the passage that followed the silent *amidah* puts it, “Aware of my frailty, I am like a vessel full of **shame and embarrassment.**” (*k’khli malei busha u’khlimah*—echoing Jeremiah 51:51)

A friend of mine is a rabbi in San Francisco. One day, she went to the grocery store after her daily jog, and picked up a few items. They came to \$9 and change. The problem was that she didn’t have change. She had mis-calculated the cost of the items she was buying; she was off by 17 cents. There were two pennies in the cup next to the cash register, but that was it. She didn’t have her credit cards, her check book, her wallet. *Nada*. The line behind her began to fidget. “Take something out,” the clerk said. The man behind her in line—we’ve all been there, haven’t we?—cleared his throat several times, and began to make a call on his cell phone. Meanwhile, my friend was a little confused, trying to figure out what she could do without. As she was fumbling around in the cart, the man behind her, with evident irritation and disgust, dug a quarter out of his pocket and, without looking at her, threw it on the conveyor belt. “Here,” he said. “Get moving already!”

She felt humiliated—because she was 15 cents short and holding up the line. Now she realized that had she been dressed in her professional clothes and jewelry, if she’d had her briefcase with her, things might have been different. The gentleman behind her might have behaved like a gentleman, he might graciously have given her the change.

But she also realized that, even if she *had* been well-dressed, she wouldn’t have had any more money to spend on food on that particular day. That’s why she was so flummoxed trying to figure out what item she could do without. Because, on that particular day, my friend, the rabbi of a large, prosperous congregation in San Francisco, was living on Food Stamps.

My friend was participating in a Congressional Food Stamp Challenge, trying to live on an average American’s food stamp budget of \$1 per meal, or \$21 per week. It wasn’t easy. As she puts it, going on food stamps is like **volunteering to star in a terrifying reality television show**. In her words, “Going on food stamps for a week was not only impossible to accomplish, but it was degrading, demeaning, disgusting, and profoundly eye opening.” (Rabbi Sydney Mintz, Yom Kippur 5768 sermon)

And that’s what it feels like to *pretend* to be on food stamps.



There's something shameful about hunger. The sensitive and wise humanitarian, Elie Wiesel, points out that, in Hebrew, the expression for hunger is different from the terms used for all other natural diseases and catastrophes. Poverty is "*oni*;" captivity is "*shi'bud*," but hunger is "*kherpat ra'av*", not simply "hunger," but literally, "the *shame* of hunger." [The origin of the term is Ezekiel 36:30.]

Irving Cramer, the first Executive Director of MAZON, the Jewish hunger relief organization founded in 1985, used to tell the following story. A teacher in Minnesota asked his class, "How many of you had breakfast this morning?" As he expected, only a few of them raised their hands. So he continued, "How many of you skipped breakfast this morning because you don't like breakfast?" Lots of hands went up. "And how many of you skipped breakfast because you didn't have time for it?" Many other hands went up. At that point he realized that for some kids, the family's economic level might be an issue, so he continued cautiously: "How many of you skipped breakfast because your family doesn't usually eat breakfast?" A few more hands were raised. Then he noticed a small boy in the middle of the classroom, whose hand had not gone up. Thinking that the boy hadn't understood, he asked, "And why didn't you eat breakfast this morning?" The boy replied, "It wasn't my turn." (Irving Cramer, the first Executive Director of MAZON, in Dov Peretz Elkins' *Yom Kippur Readings* (2005), p.4-5.)

Do you know how many people in this world in which we live go to bed hungry every night? I was astounded to learn this: One billion people. One billion people go to bed hungry.

As Jews, hunger shouldn't be alien to us. **We are descended from hungry nomads.** Think about it: Abraham, the first Hebrew, descended to Egypt because of a famine in the Land of Canaan. (Genesis 12:10) Isaac, his son, went off to the kingdom of Avimelech for the same reason. (Genesis 26:1) And why did Joseph's brothers descend to Egypt? To find food. And that's why Naomi and her family (including her daughter-in-law, Ruth) fled to the land of Moab (Ruth 1:1-2) [See Joseph Telushkin, *Love Your Neighbor as Yourself*, pp.181-184.]

Maybe that's why it is engrained upon us to feed the hungry, no questions asked. In the Talmud, the question comes up whether, when a charity fund is approached by someone for assistance, it should make inquiries, to determine if the person is really in need. If someone is seeking clothing, the Talmud says, you can and should first confirm that he or she is really in need. After all, the resources of the community are limited; they shouldn't go to people who don't need them. But if the person is seeking food, they should be given food, or money to purchase food, right away, without investigation. (B.Bava Batra 9a)

There was hunger in the time of the Talmud, and it's still with us today.

Every six seconds—today, not in the Talmudic period and not in the middle ages—a child dies from malnutrition or some other hunger-related cause. (JTA, quoting AJWS publications) This calls to mind the statement in the book of Lamentations (4:9): "Better to be slain by the sword than to die of famine." The reason, of course, is that "starvation inflicts a slow and very painful death. Refraining from helping the starving is like standing by while someone is being tortured"—"and doing nothing...." (Telushkin, p. 183)

Elie Wiesel writes that the fact that there is hunger in the world today hurts him as a person. He witnessed hunger; he lived it. If anyone had told him when he was younger that he would once again in his lifetime read about children dying of hunger, about mothers who would not be able to feed their children, .. he would not have had the courage to go on living.

This explains, he writes, why hunger is linked linguistically to shame; why the Hebrew term for hunger is “*kherpat ra'av*,” the *shame* of hunger, instead of just “*ra'av*.” **The shame isn't just that of the people who are hungry. The shame is OURS.** *Kherpat ra'av*, the shame of hunger, is the shame of a society that tolerates hunger within it.

That shame is addressed in today's *haftarah*.

Our rabbis intended us to feel *kherpat ra'av*, that shame at the presence of hunger, ourselves, on this day. On a day when we are fasting, on this day when we are denying ourselves the food that is in our pantries—food that we know is waiting for us at the end of the day—they wanted us to think about those who may not have pantries at all—and to feel *kherpat ra'av*—shame on their behalf.

Just when we're beginning to get hunger pangs, just when we're beginning to notice that we didn't have breakfast, just when we're beginning to contemplate how hungry we're going to be at the end of the day, and how proud we'll be to deny ourselves food for such a long period of time—*that's* when we read the *haftarah* with Isaiah's stirring words that tell us bluntly: if all we're doing is thinking about our stomachs, we haven't quite gotten the message of Yom Kippur. That's not the kind of a fast that God desires.

5 Is such the fast that I desire, A day for men to starve their bodies? ...

Do you call *that* a fast, ...?

6 No, *this* is the fast I desire: ...7 It is to share your bread with the hungry. (*paros laraev lachmecha*)

(Isaiah 58:5-7)

“Share your bread with the hungry.” That's what we are supposed to do. That is what we, as a congregation, are committed to doing. Yes, we already do that: we contribute to Family Table; we have had a relationship with a Salvation Army soup kitchen. We contribute to Mazon and Yad Chessed. But the number of members of our congregation who support these endeavors and engage in these activities is not huge. Our goal this coming year, the year in which our Social Action Committee has chosen to focus on feeding the hungry, is to educate the congregation, and make many opportunities available to do just that; in essence, to universalize the involvement, so that it becomes clear that membership in our congregation doesn't just entail paying dues—it does and it should do that—but also active engagement in the holy work of *tikkun olam* to diminish *kherpat ra'av*, the shame of hunger.

You know, each time we eat, we are supposed to recite a *brachah* before eating, and then again afterwards. We don't always say *birkat ha-mazon*, the grace after meals—which is unfortunate. That prayer reminds us that God is the source of our food, and it is to God that we owe our thanks. At the end of the *Birkat haMazon*, the Grace After Meals, it is customary to recite several verses from Psalms, and one verse from Jeremiah as a concluding meditation. It has become a custom to recite one of these verses (Psalm 37:25), the one beginning with the words, “*na'ar hayiti*,” in an undertone. [Apparently, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan originated this practice.] Why is that? Well, the verse reads: “I have been young and now I have become old, but never have I seen a righteous person forsaken, nor his children begging for bread.”

It can seem astoundingly insensitive to say this. Anyone with eyes in his head knows that hunger is widespread in this world, and that it doesn't distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. How can we say such a verse?

But maybe we should say that verse out loud. Here's why: *Lo raiti*—as in, “I haven't seen children begging for bread,”—doesn't have to mean, “I've never seen it.” It could mean, “I've never just stared at it,” or “I've never overlooked it,” or “I've never gazed at it and done nothing about it.” There's precedent for such a reading. In the Book of Esther, when Esther is confronted by the suffering of her people, she says, “*Eich'chah uchal v'raiti*”—“How can I look upon the suffering of my people,” by which she means, “How can I look upon **and do nothing about** the suffering of my people?” [This interpretation was first shared with me by my colleague, Rabbi Myrna Matsa.] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks understands *lo raiti* to mean, “to stand as a passive witness to,” and says that the verse means: “when a righteous person was forsaken or his children forced to search for bread, **I never merely stood [by] and watched.**” Would that all of us could say with complete honesty that “I never merely stood by and watched”—as children begged for bread.

Isaiah reminds us that when we begin to feel hungry today, we should remember that this day isn't just about abstractly “purifying our souls,” which *could* be somewhat self-indulgent; it's about eliminating *kherpat ra'av*—the shame of hunger within our society.

If our hunger today inspires us to be the kind of people who don't overlook hungry people, who feel *kherpat ra'av*—the shame of hunger even when we're feeling full, then Yom Kippur will have done its work for us and for the entire world.

Kein Yehi Ratzon. So may it be God's will. Amen.