

Kol Nidrei 5769 Mussar and Hekhsher Tzedek

Gmar Hatimah Tovah – may you be sealed for a good year.

I am not sure how many of you know this, but I was a student entrepreneur for a number of years. I ran a small kosher deli in college. It not only provided the community on the Columbia University campus with another kosher food option, but it also helped me pay for school and I could eat all I wanted for free!

The deli took a considerable amount of time and energy, but it was a phenomenal learning experience. Some of the greatest challenges came from managing my 15-20 part-time student employees. How much to pay them? How to make sure they were not eating me out of my business – literally at times! How do I use my power as the “boss” effectively, but also fairly and reasonably?

As those of you who are businesspeople certainly know, running a business is not simple and ethical issues come to the fore all the time. Thinking about employer-employee relations led me write a paper entitled: “Pastrami, Turkey and Political Theory” in which I explored how these complex dynamics related to the ideals in Plato’s *Republic*. It was creative if nothing else....

My kosher meat suppliers were another concern. I once tried to switch meat suppliers and received an anonymous phone call where the caller said simply: “I understand you want to change vendors for your kosher meat – DON’T!” Yikes!

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Over the last year, we have all read the sobering stories about the largest kosher meat supplier in the Western Hemisphere: Agriprocessors of Pottsville, Iowa which sells meat under the names Rubashkin’s, Aaron’s, David’s and another ten or so names – over half the kosher beef and close to half of the kosher chicken sold in this country. This company run by a Lubavitch family has had problems for a number of years in terms of their treatment of their employees and their animals. This all came to a head this year when the plant was raided and was found to be replete with illegal immigrants, illegal child workers and many other alleged abuses of the law and workers. 390 undocumented workers were arrested and removed from the plant in this Immigration and Customs Enforcement raid. The Iowa Attorney General has filed an allegation of 9,311 violations of child labor laws. If the plant were “merely” a Jewish owned plant, this would be horrendous enough.

But this is a blight not only on the company, but also on all kosher consumers and the Jewish people as a whole.

The Talmud spends just as many pages, if not more, discussing how we should treat our workers, as it does discussing what happens when a drop of milk falls into a pot of meat. For some reason, the Jews involved claim to be observant, but they seem to see

only the ritual commandments as important. Much to our dismay, they have lost sight of the big Jewish picture.

Think of Isaiah's words written 2,500 years ago that we will read in tomorrow *haftarah*:

*“Hakhazeh Yehiyeh Tzom Evhareihu?
Yom Anot Adam Nafasho?
Is such the fast I desire,
A day for men to starve their bodies?*

...

⁶ *No, 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;*

...

⁷ *It 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.*

The Conservative Movement is following Isaiah's words. We cried foul when we learned of these allegations and encouraged our communities to boycott Agriprocessors, as our shul has done. This situation has given greater urgency to a new Conservative Movement initiative entitled; *Hekhsher Tzedek*, which means Justice Supervision. In addition to their kosher certification, products that bear the *Hekhsher Tzedek* will demonstrate that they were produced in accordance with the principles of *tzedek*, justice. Among the areas that will be evaluated are:

- Employee welfare, including fair wages, benefits, health safety;
- Employee training;
- Quality control and animal welfare;
- Corporate accountability and integrity; and
- Environmental impact.

We should feel proud that our movement has taken the lead on this vital issue and the Reform movement has signed on as well. The Orthodox are coming around to realize that these issues of justice should be added into the mix; however, the Ultra-Orthodox and many centrist Orthodox leaders have blasted these efforts as somehow outside of Jewish law.

It's clear to me that as Judaism evolves, *kashrut* should grow to more fully incorporate Jewish values like *tza'ar ba'alei hayyim* – the welfare and pain of the animal (that is why the Conservative movement has for years declared the veal is not kosher –

since the calves are locked up in a 2 by 3 cell, subjected to terrible conditions). We should also focus on how employees are treated, ethical integrity of a business overall and its environmental impact.

At Temple Emunah's September board meeting, our board voted unanimously to become a *Hekhsher Tzedek* congregation. But now the real work must begin – we must think about the implications of this resolution – see the www.rabbinicalassembly.org for details. As a shul, we must do a better job recycling, especially when we have functions in our building.

We should look for companies who may want to become *hekhsher tzedek* certified and then support those businesses. None of this is easy – it will take extra effort and time, and perhaps cost. But we feel that our Jewish ethics requires it of us.

Let us remember that in fifty years, future generations will think about our time and our values – did we take our eternal values and apply them to the current moment or did we look the other way?

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I've been discussing one specific issue which is critical, but I want to place it in a broader context.

Ethical concerns like this are very much on our mind on this day of Yom Kippur. Judaism from the Torah to the Prophets and from the Talmud to the law codes has always had been focused on ethical behavior.

In the nineteenth century, these ideas were distilled by Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin (better known as Rav Yisroel Salanter or the Salanter Rav) into what became known as the *Mussar* Movement. Building on the moral exhortations of *mussar* (ethical) literature dating back to the 10th century, the *Mussar* Movement asks a basic question: If everyone knows what it is to be good, why is it so hard?

Salanter claimed that this was because of the existence of unconscious forces that work on the soul. These can range from our desires, fears, anxieties to our own experience that makes us who we are. These forces must be laid bare and exposed and once confronted, one can attain a higher level of ethical behavior.

Salanter wanted to transform Jews to become vehicles for the divine presence. His practice included intense Jewish learning and cultivating one's *middot* (ethical personality traits) through the performance of *mitzvot* and therapeutic talking – to one's self and a form of group analysis.

(It's no coincidence that this develops after the Enlightenment opens up the inner life and that Freud builds on all of this.)

This group process is known as a *va'ad*, and it is a trusted safe space where one confronts his or her own shortcomings, enabling self-transformation. A gifted Conservative rabbi and scholar and my teacher Ira Stone has set this up in his own shul in Philadelphia and written a wonderful book about *mussar*, entitled: *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar*. (Highly recommended.)

In it, he shares his compelling contemporary theology, his theory of *mussar* and his *mussar* practice. Stone emphasizes that when the Torah opens with creation, God is the initiator. This reminds us that we are not responsible for our own creation, God is. No human being made themselves. Even if one day, we can clone ourselves, it may be a genetic copy, but it will not be us, since each individual is different based not only on our genetics, but our own experiences and our own unique synthesis of the outside world.

Thus, there are great consequences to this: ethics and responsibility. We all come into the world with a pre-existing debt – we owe our existence to others. And thus, we respond with *va'ahavta lereiakha kamokha* – love your neighbor as yourself.

There is a unique joy in this making space for others in the world. Doing good for others feels good, as a recent study demonstrated that one feels better giving money away.

Rabbi Stone focuses on the *yeitzer hara* and the *yeitzer hatov* – commonly translated as the good and evil inclinations. The Talmud explains that both are necessary for without the *yeitzer hara* we would not have passion, creativity and energy – this inclination is needed to create a family, build a house or run a business.

Stone shifts the definitions in a helpful way. He claims that the *yeitzer hara* is the inclination for self-preservation and the *yeitzer hatov* is the inclination for the benefit of others. Both are required, but they must be in the proper balance. My twenty month old, for the most part, is a *yeitzer hara* machine – in the sense that he is absorbed with his own self and his own needs almost exclusively. Thank God – that is how he will stay alive.

It is our Torah, however, that helps prevent our *yeitzer hara* from taking over. The Torah and its *mitzvot* help us take care of others and do good for others, finding that golden mean where we can take care of our needs and those of others.

We exist between these two inclinations the *ra* – the drive to survive and the *tov* – the drive to benefit others.

It is the vicissitudes of physical life that often cause the *ra* to overwhelm the *tov* and thus most of us have more cultivated self-preservation inclinations. But, fear not. *Mussar*, its practice and study along with the Torah and its *mitzvot* can act as an exercise room for developing our *tov* muscles.

Mussar helps us become aware that there is both *tov* and *ra* in every decision we make. It then can help us make sure that we can contain the *ra* and its tendency to go

beyond its boundaries. This happens all the time and on every level. In our daily lives we face these decisions every day – the extra time it would take for us to clean the bottles and pans to recycle them, the extra cost of buying an organic product that is better for the earth, the extra effort to find a kosher butcher whose products are from more ethical suppliers. From how we divide up our chores in our home to how we make sure that our shul recycles to how we create an ethical kosher food industry in America – they are all part of the same continuum and process.

Judaism and Jewish ethics must pervade every aspect of life – from my kosher deli in college to how we speak to one another to the kosher food we buy. It is my hope that through our study and conversations this year in a number of settings we will work on our own community's practice. We will ensure that our shul operates in accordance with the *yeitzer hatov*.

May we all learn how to be move our *yeitzer hara* to *tov* – creating a more compassionate and caring world, one that is filled with acts of love.

Amen.