

YK 5773 Yizkor

Ghana: Is This The Fast I Have Chosen?

What do you say to an adorable five-year-old boy who looks up at you with the sweetest expression – as he eyes your dessert longingly?

In Ghana, my group was asked not to share our food with the children since that could lead to jealousy and other problems, but it was not easy.

It was so strange – why would this little boy be hungry; I have all the food that I want, often too much? I fight with myself not to eat too many desserts.

What kind of world do we live in where young children suffer?

And if we can do something about it, why don't we?

* * *

On Yom Kippur, our holiest day of the year, God has Isaiah ask us this question in our *Haftarah*:

“Hakhazeh yehiyeh tzom evharehu?

Is this the fast I have chosen?

A day for people to starve their bodies?

(...)

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, to break off every yoke.

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 them, and do not ignore your own flesh.” (Isaiah 58:3-7)

Isaiah provides the answers to his questions, but the questions still echo in our world today. Isaiah demands justice.

As we sit here today, somewhat hungry, let us think about others who have no choice but to fast.

What does our fasting actually accomplish?

Now, I am not questioning it – if anything, I encourage fasting as a way to understand more deeply how many people live.

But, if we merely fast today, is that enough?

Is this the fast God desires?

* * *

My two weeks in Ghana were an intense experience, unlike anything else I have ever done.

This life-changing experience, as I said in a sermon last month, was so nuanced and paradoxical that it is difficult to sum up. It was magical and ordinary, challenging and simple, depressing and inspiring, light and heavy, quiet and loud, meaningful and confounding.

All at the same time.

The basics: we spent almost two weeks in a village called Sankor, part of Winneba, a town of 60,000 people on the Atlantic coast of Africa, two hours west of Accra, the capital of Ghana.

Our destination was an amazing NGO (non-governmental organization): the Challenging Heights School. The story of this school is quite remarkable - and it is but one of the almost 450 NGOs that the American Jewish World

Service supports in 32 different countries! AJWS raises and distributes 40-55 million dollars a year in the developing world. www.AJWS.org

The school was founded by James Kofi Annan (no relation to the former head of the UN), who was born into a poor family, the youngest of twelve. His parents simply could not afford to feed all their children.

So they made the difficult decision to “traffic” him and a few of his siblings to relatives in the fishing industry with the promise that “selling” their children this way would benefit them by providing food and even an education after the fishing season. In reality the children are subjected to terrible treatment, excruciating 17-hour-days of work and they never receive an education – trapping them and their families in an endless cycle of poverty.

At the age of thirteen, James managed to escape, returning to his home village, where his father rejected him. He learned to fend for himself – scavenging for leftover food, but wisely focused on getting an education until he was finally able to finish high school. Part-time work enabled him to attend college, which he also successfully completed.

Eventually, James became a manager at Barclays Bank, where he could have continued working, moving up the ladder without looking back down. But after a few years, he realized that his true calling is to assist others who are being as cruelly exploited as he was.

In 2007, James founded the Challenging Heights School to rescue other child slaves and those at risk of being trafficked. He donated three-quarters of his annual income, as he launched this initiative. Over the last five years, the school has grown to over 400 children aged 4-17.

During our two weeks in Ghana, we worked with a construction crew to build sections of the facility, but the real work was absorbing all this, studying global poverty and Jewish sources that relate to it, and discussing how we, as rabbis, can make a difference.

* * *

Is this the fast I have chosen?

Throughout the experience in Ghana, I was challenged to consider what is just and whether I am making just choices in my own life.

How can I bring more justice in the world?

This experience opened up profound questions for me.

I will never look at the world the same way. As a matter of fact, I don't look at food the same way any more.

In Ghana, our group was served two containers of food at each meal. This mostly vegan fare was quite tasty and lovingly prepared for us by a chef on separate dishes that had been set aside for Jewish groups that had come to volunteer.

But while they considered it plenty of food, if not a somewhat elaborate meal, if you were one of the last people to take, often you did not get, or you did not get enough. The quantities of food that we consume are simply to a different power of 10 than the quantities consumed in most of the world.

One of the main difficulties we have in America is that there is too much food – too many calories. But in most of the world, families get by on a dollar or

two a day. There is not always enough food. Many of the children that I met were hungry and puzzled: how could we be so well fed?

We spent our mornings working with a construction crew, mixing cement. While I'm not sure that we provided much benefit, the crew did tell us that we helped somewhat, and that made me feel good. I worked hard and pushed myself to lift 110-pound bags of concrete, which we mixed into cement and poured into the foundations of simple small rooms and homes and a shower that we were building.

But, of course, the biggest benefit wasn't our manual labor; it was that our group of seventeen rabbis was able to have an experience that we could share with all of you. While the work was transformative, its full impact is being realized right now as you become partners in our experience.

Is this the fast I have chosen?

* * *

Looking into the face of a child who was traumatized and abused was not an easy thing, and then I thought about my own weaknesses. Perhaps the place where the trip worked most powerfully was not the person-power we provided, nor even this moment of sharing, but an internal process of meditating on the question that I asked on Rosh Hashanah: *Ayeka* – where are you? Or, in this case, *Ayeni* – where am I?

Looking at these children reminded me of the great blessing that I have - I do not struggle to eat, and while I stress about things, they are really not the life or death issues that many people in the world face.

How blessed are we to live in this land, in this great country, where we have religious freedom, where we can gather as Jews, where we have economic opportunities, where we can be successful, where we have food to eat, where we can educate our children, where we can pass on our Jewish tradition and culture!

I think of my own paternal grandmother who lived through World War I, enduring terrible traumas. When she came to America she was so thankful to be here that she told me her American identity superseded her Jewish identity. After being in Ghana, I understand that better. If you can't eat, you can't live, let alone be a Jew.

Can I imagine the trauma that these parents had to face thinking that it might actually be better to sell their children into slavery than let them stay at home and go hungry?

Is this the fast I have chosen?

* * *

We spent one day travelling to the Gold Coast, to what had been one of the world's largest slave castles.

From the 16th to 19th centuries, over 5 million African people passed through this castle that was run by the British. Africans were taken from their homes, from their people, often by other Africans who were collaborators, brought to this castle, and then sent on their journey to other parts of the world as slaves.

We saw the inhumane conditions they endured – cramped, dark and waste-filled holding rooms.

As I stood there, I had a flash-back to the years when I led USY trips to Poland and I saw the concentration and extermination camps.

Just as I cried in Poland thinking of the suffering our people endured, I cried thinking of the suffering that these people endured.

There is a plaque commemorating President and Mrs. Obama's 2009 visit to the same slave castle.

What might they have felt standing in that place?

We also learned of the other resources that were stolen from Africa: gold and coffee, minerals and other products were simply plundered from this continent and taken to build Europe and North America and South America. It hit me that part of our success, part of our wealth as a nation, was built on this theft of people and goods.

And while my family came to America long after slavery, there is no doubt that the institutions that we all benefit from were built on the backs of African slaves and looted goods.

Where does that leave us? What does such an injustice mean?

And slavery persists today! Much of the chocolate we eat is harvested by child slaves. Can I buy another piece of chocolate that is not fair trade?

<http://www.fairtradeusa.org/>

Is this the fast I have chosen?

* * *

What about water?

The school had a large water tank and almost everyone in the neighborhood would come with a big pail, fill it, and carry the water to their homes. I watched little children – three or four years old carrying huge amounts of water on their heads as if it were nothing.

When we see how precious water is, that each drop has to be carried, how can we ever allow the water run?

When I came back, I looked at my sprinkler and said, "How can I use water for something so unimportant?" And how ironic that it is easier for me to provide water for my grass than it was for them to get drinking water?

And then, the absurdity that our pure and clean water isn't good enough so we waste money and oil drinking gallons and gallons of bottled water!

Is this the fast I have chosen?

* * *

The children there were fascinating. While for the most part they had very few things – maybe one or two sets of clothing, overall, they looked happier than our children. They didn't have any iPods or smart phones, but they seemed pretty OK without those things.

They didn't need any play dates or activities. They simply played with a carefree style that I rarely see here. And while some of them may have been a bit hungry, their simpler existence seemed almost better than ours.

They were quite responsible. I watched a girl, who was maybe nine years old, with her three-year old brother strapped to her back, walk up a big hill, about half a mile. Finally I turned to her and said, "Isn't it hard to carry your brother?" She just kind of looked at me with an expression that said, "What are you

asking?” My question didn’t make sense. It wasn’t hard or easy; it was just something that needed to be done.

There were many moments when I wished that I had brought my own children.

If they had seen what I saw in Ghana, would I need to remind them to not waste food, to turn off the water when they brush their teeth, to clean up after themselves, to appreciate all the gifts that they have?

I realized that everyone should have this type of experience. And thankfully, the AJWS runs programs for students and adults to do just that.

[http://ajws.org/what we do/service and travel opportunities/study tours/](http://ajws.org/what_we_do/service_and_travel_opportunities/study_tours/)
[http://ajws.org/what we do/service and travel opportunities/volunteer corps/](http://ajws.org/what_we_do/service_and_travel_opportunities/volunteer_corps/)
[http://ajws.org/what we do/service and travel opportunities/volunteer summer/](http://ajws.org/what_we_do/service_and_travel_opportunities/volunteer_summer/)

* * *

We spent our afternoons learning, discussing, meeting with people and thinking. We read articles about justice.

Here’s a question: it turns out that we need around \$30-40,000 to live in America – to put a roof over our heads, to eat, to take care of our basic necessities, can we in any way justify keeping the excess money?

Shouldn’t we donate all of that to help people all over the world that truly need it? If we don’t and people literally starve to death, are we not then complicit in some act of murder??

Our Torah teaches: “*Lo ta’amod al dam rei’akha* – do not stand idly by when someone’s blood is being shed.” That was one of the key teachings that motivated us a decade ago to get involved in the movement to save the people of Darfur.

As Jews we can’t sit idly by when there is injustice in the world.

If we have an opportunity to save the lives of people who are starving, how can we not do it?

As Jews, we are taught to be involved in *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

Ruth Messinger, the head of AJWS joined our group for the second week and shared the story of an adult farmer in Uganda who told an AJWS college student volunteer that he had decided over the course of the summer that he was Jewish.

When the volunteer asked him what he meant, he replied: “I’m Jewish, too. I want to leave the world better than I found it.”

Is this the fast I have chosen?

* * *

What are the statistics?

Over 1 billion people face hunger around the world.

Every six seconds a child dies because of hunger and related causes.

6.6 million children under five die in developing countries each year due to malnutrition.

And right here in America, there are 37 million people (13 million of them are children who go to bed hungry).

And almost no one, almost no politician even acknowledges their existence.

Meanwhile, 40 percent of all food produced in the United States is thrown away.

* * *

A Midrash:

Our rabbis taught that Job asked God: “Master of the universe, did I not feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty. . . ? And did I not clothe the naked?”

God responds to Job: “Job, you have not achieved half of Abraham’s measure. You wait in your house for the wayfarers to come to you. To those who usually eat wheat bread, you give wheat bread; to those who usually eat meat, you give meat; to those who usually drink wine, you give wine.

“But Abraham would seek wayfarers and bring them into his house. To those who never ate wheat bread, he gave wheat bread; to those who never ate meat, he gave meat; to those who never drank wine, he gave wine. And more than that, he built large buildings on the highways stocked with food and drink, so every passerby could eat and drink and bless Heaven.”

(based on *Avot d’Rabbi Natan* 7:1)

Is this the fast I have chosen?

* * *

Culture shock: When I got home, we immediately had to go on a vacation. Now when I say “had to,” of course we didn’t “have to.”

We hopped in the car and the first place that we stopped was Ben & Jerry’s in Vermont for dessert. When we got to the front of the line, the kids wanted different flavors. But I was concerned about some of them and said:

“No, no, no – you can’t get that flavor.”

“Why not, Abba?”

“That one’s not fair trade.”

My 8-year old son Ari asked, “Abba, what’s fair trade?”

I tried to explain: “Fair trade means that the way the workers are treated ensures that bad things don’t happen in the making of the products that went into the ice cream. So that ice cream flavor is better.”

Ari was puzzled.

I was having trouble explaining so I said, “Do you like the Milk and Cookies flavor?”

“Sure.”

“Then, please just get that – that’s fair trade!”

* * *

I promised myself when I left Ghana that I would make some changes in my own life. And I am happy to report that I have been able to do a little better job recycling and composting, using less energy, examining products and companies more and thinking about how I can make a bigger difference in the world.

One day in Ghana we broke into small groups to discuss ways we could bring our experience home.

A couple of other rabbis and I sat down and discussed our retirement savings. While it was not a huge amount of money, it was the largest amounts we had.

Are we investing in the right companies? Are those companies at all connected to the values that we care about or are they running right over them?

One colleague pointed out that he had invested a decade ago in socially conscious mutual funds, but they performed very poorly, so he pulled out of them.

Is it better to invest in better-performing mutual funds that will give him more money which he can donate to charity?

Or is it better to invest in companies that connect to our values?

Is this the fast I have chosen?

I am excited to work with our Social Action Committee to deepen the work that we already do and to think about how we can embark on new projects to make a bigger difference in the world. I hope you will join me. (Thursday, Nov 15, 7:45pm)

* * *

When we arrived the first morning at the school, the students were dressed up in yellow and blue uniforms. There was very little fidgeting, no talking, and everyone stood at attention.

They were singing: "Ghana is marching, Ghana is marching, Ghana, Ghana, Ghana is marching. Sixth of March 1957 Ghana Independence Day."

But when the principal said, "To whom much is given," they all responded, incredibly loudly, "much is expected."

This was a powerful way to start a day.

A statement of gratitude, of appreciation. These kids don't have much, but they are being given an opportunity in this school, and they understand that much is expected.

That simple lesson is one that we should internalize into our own lives. We should understand that we have been given much; whether we have a lot or a little, all of us have many blessings.

That basic attitude of gratitude is a core Jewish teaching – how we start the day and how we live our lives.

These children understood that and modeled it throughout their day.

We should all realize that not only should we begin each day with a spirit of gratitude to God, saying "*Modeh Ani* – I am grateful," but we should understand that the gifts we have been given obligate us in concrete ways.

Much is expected means, that we have the *hiyyuv*, the obligation to fulfill the *mitzvot*, our concrete blueprint of how to live a moral and ethical life, how to take care of others, how to perform acts of *hesed* - acts of loving kindness - and how to imbue our lives with meaningful rituals and purpose.

We have been given much. What is expected of us? "To whom much has been given?" "Much is expected."

You try it:

To whom much has been given?

MUCH IS EXPECTED!

To whom much has been given?
MUCH IS EXPECTED!

Gmar hatimah tovah. May we all be sealed for a good year.

Please visit my AJWS fundraising page here:
http://action.ajws.org/site/TR/Events/AmericanJewishWorldService?pxfid=5090&fr_id=1150&pg=fund