

Hunger in S'dom; Hunger Today

In what has been a stormy, turbulent week - it is such a blessing to see all of you this morning. To be in shul smiling, sitting together and enjoying the tranquility of Shabbat.

As I watched the storm coverage, like you, I was moved and saddened by all the devastation and damage across the Northeast. I was particularly struck by a report that featured a family who still hadn't had its power restored...the mother in the family, standing in the rubble, said

You know, despite the damage, it's nice to not have the constant hum of the tv going or the constant interruptions from cell phones...it's nice to have my family's undivided attention...

On the one hand, I was inspired by this woman's ability to find the silver lining in a cloud of despair. And on the other hand, her words reminded me of how lucky we are to have Shabbat every week. A moment to connect with family and friends in very meaningful and deep ways.

Hunger plays a significant role in this week's parashah. Hagar experiences hunger when she is kicked out of Abraham's house; the prophet Elisha helps a struggling woman in the haftarah; and hunger plays a significant role in the destruction of S'dom and Amora.

We first hear about S'dom and Amora in chapter 13 of Bereisheet. It comes as Lot and Abraham are parting ways – Lot looks down and sees “how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, like the garden of the Lord.” Gen 13:13 reads

<p>יג וְאִנְשֵׁי סְדֹם, רָעִים וְחַטָּאִים, לִיה-יְהוָה, מְאֹד.</p>	<p>13 Now the men of S'dom were wicked and sinners against the LORD exceedingly.</p>
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After stating this fact, the Torah then changes subjects and continues detailing the events in Abraham and Sarah's lives.

In today's reading, God appears before Abraham and says:

<p>כ וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, זַעֲקַת סְדֹם וְעַמּוּרָה כִּי-רָבָה; וְחַטָּאתָם--כִּי כְבֹדָה, מְאֹד.</p>	<p>²⁰ Then the Lord said, "The outrage of S'dom and Amarah is so great, and their sin so grave!</p>
<p>כא אֲרִדָּה-נָא וְאֶרְאֶה, הַכְּצַעֲקוּתָהּ הַבָּאָה אֵלַי עֲשׂוּ כָלֵה; וְאִם-לֹא, אֲדַעַה.</p>	<p>²¹ I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me; if not, I will take note."</p>

הַכְּצַעֲקוּתָהּ הַבָּאָה

According to the outcry that has reached Me

The rabbis are curious about the phraseology.

What was the outcry - who was screaming?

What's more, we already knew the city was wicked...so what was different now?

Noticing that the word that the outcry is feminine, the rabbis craft multiple stories outlining the wickedness of S'dom and about the woman who was screaming.

The Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 109a, relates the following story:

A certain maiden gave some bread to a poor man, hiding it in a pitcher. On the matter becoming known, they daubed her with honey and placed her on the parapet of the wall, and the bees came and consumed her. Thus it is written, And the Lord said, The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah, *וְעָקַת סְדוֹם וְעִמּוֹרָה כִּי-רַבָּה*, because it is great (rabbah): whereupon Rab Judah commented in Rab's name: on account of the maiden (ribah).

Bereisheet Rabbah teaches:

Said R Levi, Even if I wanted to keep silent, the requirement of justice for a certain girl will not allow me to keep silent. There was the case of two girls, who went down to draw water from the well. One said to her friend, Why are you pale? The other said, All the food is gone from our house and we are ready to die. What did the other do? She filled the jug with flour and exchanged it for her own. Each took the one of the other. When the Sodomites found out about it, they took the girl (who had shared the food) and burned her. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, Even if I wanted to keep silent, the requirement of justice for a certain girl will not allow me to keep silent. What is written is not, 'In accord with their cry', but, 'according to her cry', referring in particular to the girl.

I find it significant that both of these stories revolve around issues of hunger and justice. Ultimately, it is their violation that prompts God to get involved.

God went down to investigate the issues of Justice and Hunger in S'dom

Today, I'd like for us to do the same.

- Today, there are roughly 7 billion people in the world. Of those 7 billion, According to the UN *World Food Programme*, roughly 870 million people do not have enough to eat and 98 percent of them live in developing countries
- Hunger kills more people than AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria
- One out of four children - roughly 146 million - in developing countries is underweight.
- Iron deficiency is the most prevalent form of malnutrition worldwide, affecting an estimated 2 billion people. Eradicating iron deficiency can improve national productivity levels by as much as 20 percent.
- Iodine deficiency is the greatest single cause of mental retardation and brain damage, affecting 1.9 billion people worldwide. It can easily be prevented by adding iodine to salt.

In our own country:

- According to the US Department of Agriculture report on Household Food Security in the United States, 14.5 percent of U.S. households struggle to put enough food on the table.
- More than 48 million Americans—including 16.2 million children—live in these households.
- More than one in five children is at risk of hunger.
- Among African-Americans and Latinos, nearly one in three children is at risk of hunger.

In our own state:

- A local report from the Greater Boston Food Bank reveals that 394,300 people were served by GBFB in 2009, a 23 percent increase since the last study was conducted in 2005.

- This means that a little more than 8 percent of the eastern Massachusetts population uses a food pantry, soup kitchen or shelter.
- Due to underreporting and other statistical factors, GBFB may actually be serving as many as 545,000 annually.
- About a third of the households receiving food assistance have at least one child younger than 18 years of age.

And in our own community:

- Jewish Family and Children Family Table presently serves almost 650 individuals every month.
- Last year, we provided more than 17,000 bags of groceries.
- Each household receives a complete set of healthy groceries including fresh produce, personal hygiene items, and Jewish holiday and ritual items such as hallah and Shabbat candles.
- Given the documented link between good health and good nutrition, Family Table provides the healthiest food possible along with healthy recipes using food from our pantry to promote health among recipients.

People in our midst are hungry. And yet the problem is not lack of food. I will say again, the problem is not lack of resources.

I will read directly from material from AJWS.

Global hunger is not the result of a global food shortage.

The world's farmers produce enough food to adequately feed every person on the planet, yet nearly 1 billion people worldwide are experiencing hunger.

The truth is that global hunger is a profoundly political problem, driven by deliberate political and economic policies that perpetuate unequal access to food.

To reverse hunger, we must address the root causes of this inequality and focus on creating and supporting sustainable food systems that empower local farmers and communities. Reforming the U.S. international food aid system is an important step toward food justice.

I am not an expert on government policies but I trust Ruth Messenger and the folks at the American Jewish World Service. Rabbi Lerner and I encourage you to learn more about the farm bill and petition our representatives and senators to work on approving a more just Farm Bill.

I'd like to shift gears for a moment and discuss another aspect of Hunger in our country.

Suppose you lost your job and needed help for food...where do you turn...friends, family, non-profits, the government?

For me, I always assumed, the government would help people when they are in trouble. But what does the care look like?

Although the most well known program to combat hunger is referred to food stamps, today it is known as SNAP which stands for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Some Facts:

- SNAP helped put food on the table for 44.5 million people in March 2011. It provides low-income households with electronic benefits they can use to purchase food.
- According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which is responsible for administering the Food Stamp Program, the nationwide average monthly benefit in Fiscal Year 2010 was \$133.79, approximately \$4.50 a day or \$1.50 a meal.
- In general, the federal government requires that households earning below the federal poverty line and with less than \$2,000 in countable resources, such as a bank account, be considered eligible for SNAP benefits.

What is the family poverty level?

For a family with no children – \$15,000

For a family with 1 child = \$18,000

For a family with 2 children = \$23,000

These aren't astronomically high numbers....

Potentially, you could be working full time... and not be able to qualify for food stamps.

But I ask, could your family spend \$31.50 on groceries per person per week? If you are a family of four – could you make it on \$133.79 per week on groceries.

If you could... would you be eating healthy?

Fruits? Vegetables? Meat? Kosher Meat?

Next week, Rabbi Lerner and I will attempt to live solely on 31.50 for the week during the Food Stamp Challenge.

And we know - this doesn't represent what it actually feels like to be poor.

We don't know what its like to not know where your next meal is coming from.

It doesn't encapsulate choosing between paying rent or buying food.

It doesn't replicate the drama between choosing food or medicine.

We invite you to join us in taking the food stamp challenge.

Sign up as an individual,

Sign up as a family

Get your friends, neighbors and children involved.

And even if you know you can't make it...

if you can't last the whole week on the budget...

Participate anyway...

Now I know that learning about these statistics can be daunting. There are so many mouths to feed and people to help. And yet the more we learn about hunger, the more reasons we have to be optimistic...

- Our shul donates to family table.
- Many families choose to donate the leftovers from events to the local food pantry.
- Our synagogue volunteers in the Lexington Interfaith Garden.
- Many of our teens donate funds to help stamp out hunger as part of their Bat/Bar Mitzvah experience.

A few years ago, when Shayna and I went down to New Orleans to help in the relief after the aftermath of Katrina, I wanted to make hoodies for the trip participants.

And I was looking for a good quote to put on the back.

<p>יא כי לא יחדל אביון, מקרב הארץ ; על-כן אנכי מצויד, לאמר, פתח תפתח את-ידיך לאחידך לענייך ולאבלייך, בארצך. {ס}</p>	<p>11 For the poor shall never cease to be poor in the land; therefore I command thee, saying: 'You shall surely open your hand to the poor and needy brother, in your land.' {S}</p>
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Shayna didn't think it was the most uplifting message...

And she was right... but I believe the message is true. In some ways, I don't know if we will ever do enough to completely eradicate hunger.

But by learning more and getting involved, we can accomplish the quote that was eventually put on the hoodie...

Ani V' Atah, n'shaneh et haolam...

You and I can change the world.

And we can start together, one meal at a time.

Shabbat Shalom