

Gam Zeh Ya'avor: This, Too, Shall Pass - Yom Kippur 5770 (2009)

As always, there's good news and bad news this year. The good news is, we've been told we're in an economic recovery. The bad news is, we may have sobered up, but we have one heck of a hangover!

This has been a year for the record books. Too big to fail companies have fallen off the face of the earth. The government now owns General Motors. Our retirement funds, college accounts, and savings were hit hard and we all now have much less than we thought we had. While unemployment, work furloughs, reduced benefits, and pay cuts are commonplace.

As a result, I have used my Rabbi's Discretionary Fund this year to pay overdue mortgages, car payments, and utilities bills. Yes, some of us were hit hard; others of us were dealt a knockout blow. Homes have been lost, families have been driven into bankruptcy or are hanging on by a thread, and rebuilding from this disaster, whenever that time comes, is going to be monumental for many.

Our economy may be in recovery, but we're not. We're traumatized, shell-shocked, and trying still just to regroup and recoup. It is a fact that we are all beginning now to accept – that we need to revise our financial expectations and get a new game plan. Because if this happened once, it can happen again. March 9th was a profound warning to us that our economy is indeed now global, and even as a whole big world, we're probably not too big to fail.

Yom Kippur is the time when we stand in judgment and assess our situation. We are reminded that we cannot control our mortality, or whether the wheel of fortune will turn our way or not. But, as we are taught, we do have the ability to respond to all of life as it is presented to us. And ultimately, this is where judgment is rendered – how well we have done with that which is given to us.

So, how do we respond to these threatening times? And even if we're in recovery, slowly putting the pieces back together, how are we now restructuring our lifestyles to be more in line with lessons learned?

At this point, I think we'd all agree that we, as a consumer society, had been on quite a bender before the recession. Over the last ten years, we racked up huge credit card debt, took on sub-prime mortgages that were way over our heads, and fueled the economy with our binge spending.

No wonder we're hung over! It's the morning after, and the refuse of our partying is strewn around the place. Ice packs and strong coffee, please!

Was that me dancing the rumba on the coffee table last night? Did I make that big hole in screen door?

Wait a minute. I grew up in a middle class home on a quiet street in America. We didn't have a big house or fancy stuff. How did I turn into such a materialist? This is what most of America is asking right now. How did we become so greedy, how did we create inverse pyramids of wealth that were bound to collapse on us? How did we party all our hard earned wealth away through risky investments and financial greed?

Well, it turns out, there is a term for what got us here. It's called, the "Hedonic Treadmill." On the Hedonic Treadmill, the higher our income rises, the more our material wants and desires increase along with it. So, in effect, we end up running faster and faster in place, but with happiness and satisfaction always just beyond our reach. The boom of the last ten years has clearly created a culture of excess and craving. For some reason, we thought we needed it all – big Hummers, lots of Bling everywhere – the more, the more!

Kathleen Vohs is a consumer psychologist who did an interesting experiment. She put one group of people in front of computers with screensavers of floating dollar bills, and another group in front of computers with screensavers of swimming fish. Then, after awhile, she asked them all to work on a task, and gave them the choice of working either individually or in groups. The result was

fascinating. 80% of those who had been staring at the dollar bills said they'd rather work alone, while 80% of those looking at fish wanted to team up with others.

Money, it seems, has a direct effect on our brains. It creates a bio-chemical urge to be self-isolating, and self-absorbed.

Rabbi Abraham Twersky, who works with those in recovery, has another take on the Hedonic Treadmill. He says it's about vanity versus humility. He explains that vanity is commonly misunderstood. It's not a matter of being conceited or self-obsessed. Vanity is actually the belief that we've worked hard, achieved a great deal, and we're truly deserving of all the rewards that come with our success. Humility, on the other hand, is the feeling that we haven't yet reached our human potential, and there is much more for us to accomplish and contribute to this world. Therefore, when we feel humble, we also feel that we haven't yet earned a big reward.

Well, without consulting us, the recession knocked all of us off the treadmill. We have indeed been humbled and made to realize that not only can our successes be fleeting, but also dependent on lots of external factors, like Wall Street and global financial markets. Whether we like it or not, we are part of a big school of fish.

So, Americans have really done an about-face in recent months. In fact, ironically, we're now told that one of the biggest drags on the economic recovery is that we're all holding back and saving our money again. This summer, we traveled less and stayed closer to home, we did more of our shopping at Walmart, and we turned back to many of life's simple and homespun pleasures.

In fact, it's very telling to note where the economy and spending has gone up this year. In New York City, where it's easy to measure such things, museum entrances have apparently been up. So have single ticket admissions to lectures and concerts. Of course, many restaurants have gone under, but the ones that have done well are mainly family style and neighborhood restaurants, which are not only moderately priced, but also have a social component, as diners are likely to know the owners and the other neighbors who also dine there.

I would add that enrollment in seminaries is up, too, as more applicants are inclined to seek meaningful careers and, for now at least, avoid Wall Street. Also, volunteerism is way up, with more people entering volunteer training programs, serving meals to the elderly, and stepping up to be Big Brothers and Big Sisters.

So, what does all of this tell us? Swarthmore psychologist Barry Schwartz, who studies such things, says that people really do get more pleasure from experiences than they do from possessions. And the recession has brought us back to this basic human principle.

And in fact, it is true that Americans have changed their attitudes toward material things this year. In a recent survey, the Pew Research Center asked people whether they consider certain things to be a necessity or not. For example, in 2006, 70% of respondents said home air conditioning is a necessity. This year, only 54% said so. Surprisingly, this year only 4% of Americans think of an iPod as a necessity, and only 52% think television is a necessity, the lowest figure since the question was first asked in 1973.

So, it would seem that Dr. Schwartz's theory is correct, and we *are* looking at our material possessions differently. In his book, "The Paradox of Choice," he makes a distinction between those he calls, "Maximizers" and "Satisficers." Maximizers are always looking for the best of everything, and become easily disappointed when they don't acquire it. They second-guess whether they bought the best, they have regrets about what their neighbor has and they didn't buy, and they're unable to enjoy what they actually do have. Satisficers on the other hand, are obviously, those who can truly be happy with whatever they have. And this may be one of the silver linings of the recession. It has pulled us all off the Hedonic Treadmill, and given us a new chance to stand still and appreciate what we do have.

But, in our hearts, we know that we don't actually need scientists to tell us this. All we have to do is remember the stories of our grandparent's and great grandparent's. How they came to America with the clothes on their backs, slept in the same bed with their siblings in their cramped Lower East Side apartment. How they stole rides on the streetcar and the back of the ice truck, and never felt they lacked for anything, because they had everything that counted – a life rich in experience, in community, in the love and closeness of a big family.

The days of the streetcar and the ice truck are long gone, and the Lower East Side is now an upscale artist colony. But, its storied walls, if they could talk, would teach a valuable lesson for us today.

And if, indeed, there are lessons and silver linings to the recession, then another one might be the opportunities that times such as these present. Put differently, the big question is, what is going to drive our next economic expansion? In the late 1800's it was the building of railroads, and their ability to carry raw materials to fuel the industrial revolution. Many also hearken back to FDR's New Deal as a model, which helped pull us out of the Great Depression.

Well, what will it be for us? Right now, there are hundreds of new technologies and ideas incubating that aren't even on our radar screens – green technology, bioscience, pharmaceuticals. Any one of them could explode into the next great breakthrough for our society and our economy. Now, more than ever, is the time to renew our faith in American ingenuity. If we look only to consumerism & materialism for our recovery, it may seem like we have a long haul ahead. But, this has never been the American way. We are a nation of inventors, innovators, and even dreamers. Now is the time for all of us to dream.

Suzanne Wasserman, director of the Gotham Center for New York City History, tells the story of one of New York's prominent citizens. Yip Harburg was once a wealthy businessman and co-owner of the Consolidated Electrical Appliance Company. That is until 1929, when he and his company went bust. What did he do? Well, rather than jump out of a window, as many did during the Depression, he decided that he would follow his dream. He had always wanted to be a lyricist. I think you may have heard of some of his work. Yip Harburg was the one who wrote all of the lyrics for the "Wizard of Oz," "Finian's Rainbow," and many other famous shows, in addition to collaborating on the song that turned out to be the Depression anthem, "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?" Had he and his company not gone broke, we would have been the poorer for it today.

Of course following our dreams is well and good when we're still standing. But now I want to say a word to those who have been cut down by this recession. There are some of our temple members who have lost their jobs or companies, gone through their savings, who have lost or are losing their homes, and are literally at ground zero. I can only imagine how you suffer everyday and how difficult it must be to keep faith.

The first thing I want to say, is that while all of us have been hurt in some way by the recession, we also recognize that, "there but for the grace of God go I." It could have just as easily been worse for the least affected, and better for the harder hit. So many events out of our control have affected us, that we must all acknowledge the Yiddish saying, "man plans and God laughs."

If I had any doubt of this, it was dispelled when I turned on CNN one day and saw the family of the late President of our Reform Movement, Rabbi Alexander Schindler. Rabbi Schindler had actually been at Temple Solel on several occasions during his tenure as President, and he was truly a visionary leader and rabbi. But, his family was on CNN, because they were fire-saling their home, and auctioning off his treasures – a yad, or Torah pointer, and other fine Judaica he had received over the years. It seems that before his death, he transferred his entire pension to Bernie Madoff, and his survivors now have nothing.

So, I want you who have been hit hardest to know one thing – it's not your fault. It could have just as easily been any one of us whose company downsized, or savings went under. Man plans and God laughs.

Our job is just to try to be here for you. As a synagogue family, we have taken a solemn vow to keep every member within our midst, to lose no one who is suffering from financial setback. Now, is when a temple family closes ranks, holds each other's hands, and stands together. We will try in every way possible to support you through this transition.

In light of the events of this past year, Rabbi Michael Marmur, Vice President of our Hebrew Union College rabbinical school, wrote a heartfelt letter to us alumni. And I think it's appropriate to share what he said about the difference between Optimism and Hope. Optimism, he wrote, "is to believe that everything is heading towards a happy ending." But since, for many, that happy ending isn't yet in sight, it's difficult to be optimistic. Thus, Rabbi Marmur offered an alternative to optimism, which is hope. Hope, he said, is the more profound belief that, "whatever happens, a way of coping and building toward the future may be found."

In our current circumstance, hope is what we can offer you, and hope is what we *all* need most:

Hope that we will get through this.

Hope that we can support each other and pull together as a community and a great society.

Hope that valuable lessons have been learned and our personal priorities re-ordered.

Hope that the spirit of volunteerism in our society has been rekindled, and the value of simple pleasures renewed.

And hope that our dreams, our great ideas, our magnificent American pioneering spirit will lift us up and carry us to an uncharted, even enchanted future.

I believe that when we look back on this time, we will see that this emptying out had a certain benefit to us. Our rabbis called it, *tzimzum*, physical and spiritual contraction. *Tzimzum* leads us from a place of vanity to a place of humility, from an ego-centered existence of unquenchable personal and material longing, to a life enjoyed with others and uplifted by simple human experience.

This Yom Kippur, whether we intended it or not, we have all found ourselves in a place of *Tzimzum*. Perhaps we needed to cast some things off anyway, to become more humble people. In any case, amidst the current uncertainty, we'll just have to hope – hope that we can cope with this trial and even turn out better people for it.

Thus, I leave you with this wisdom teaching from the Chinese Tao, which understands something of *Tzimzum* and the hope of this day:

It takes thirty spokes to make a wheel:

But the hole in the center makes it useful for a cart.

It takes a lump of clay to make a pot:

But the empty space within it gives the pot its value.

A house needs walls and doors and windows:

But the empty space is what we call a room to live in.

Thus, fullness has its role, but emptiness redeems it.