

What to Do When You're Really Hungry Yom Kippur

By Rabbi Jason Miller

I once heard the singer songwriter Dave Matthews say something very powerful before launching into a song. He spoke about being back in South Africa, his native country. He was in the town of Soweto, and found himself asking his friend, a local, “when are we gonna’ eat?” His friend said first they would go out and have a drink, and then they would eat. Dave then recalls saying aloud “Come on man, I’m starving!” The people there just looked at him dumbfounded. He immediately realized he used a “bad word” – especially in a place like that. In that part of South Africa, where the poverty rate was quite high, and millions suffered from hunger, no one with ample means would dare use the term “starving,” or “hungry,” when they were ready for lunch, or for dinner, or a snack to eat.

He then proceeded to explain how from the shoulders up, he was South African and from the waist down he was South African, but in the middle (meaning his stomach) he was very American. I’m not sure if this was a valid excuse for his poor choice of words in this area of the world, but he couldn’t have been more correct. For many Americans, we throw around words like “hungry” and “starving” without considering the millions who really are.

Chances are that we don’t have any close friends or family who are truly without food to eat. But, believe it or not, there are hungry people in our midst. We need to open our eyes to the ever-increasing rate of poverty in our country. Rabbi Aaron Kriegel of New Jersey, points out that “the Jewish poor live among us. In our community, many do not have sufficient money to pay rent, buy food, or even survive... We help Jewish communities the world over, but we have no time to help these poor who live among us. We feed the unknown poor, but disregard those who are our neighbors or who once lived in our neighborhoods.” At this time of year when we pray for [future] sustenance, we must also be proactive, and help sustain those who cannot sustain themselves. The real hungry men and women.

Here we are at Kol Nidrei – commencing our full day fast, reflecting on the year gone by, and concentrating on our transgressions. We must also look to the New Year in our atonement; we must resolve to do more to feed the hungry of the world and to put an end to the alarming poverty in our own country. I’ve never liked the message that we are fasting on Yom Kippur for only one day, but there are millions who are fasting for days and days. So too, I am no fan of saying that we eat in our sukkah on the holiday of Sukkot to get a taste of homelessness. The mitzvah of fasting on Yom Kippur is not to augment our empathy for the hungry. It is for the purpose of spiritual cleansing and ritual atonement. And we eat in flimsy, cold huts because we are commanded to as a remembrance of our agricultural ancestors in the fields during the harvest.

However, as we set out our agenda for the New Year, desiring to increase our gemilut chasadim – our charitable acts, it is an ideal time to contribute to society. Ma’achil Re’evim – feeding the hungry – is a prime mitzvah to kick off the Jewish New Year. We don’t fast to see what it’s like to be hungry, and yet we have the moral imperative to understand that millions throughout the world will not touch a morsel of food today, but not because they are commanded so by God. They will not find nourishment because they live in utter poverty. And the situation is growing bleaker. So, what can we do about this? What is our role? Beyond bringing canned foods to shul once a year, what more must we do?

We need to begin a relationship with organizations like Mazon, with Kosher food pantries, with homeless shelters, and with soup kitchens. Tomorrow will mark the fourteenth anniversary of my bar mitzvah. And to this day, I honestly do not remember what the centerpieces looked like on each table at my bar mitzvah party, nor do I remember what the guests ate; but, I do remember the small placards informing the guests that a portion of the cost of their meal went to Yad Ezra – a kosher food bank in Michigan. We must donate our time, working at homeless shelters on Christmas and Thanksgiving – serving food when they’re short on staff. We must buy a sandwich and a cup of coffee for the homeless woman on the street to whom we might otherwise avert our eyes.

I remember being at a USY convention in high school when “The Mitzvah Man” Danny Siegel took to the dais to give the keynote address. He took out three oranges and placed them on the podium informing the thousand or so people in the room that he had procured these pieces of fruit a few hours earlier – from a dumpster in the back of the hotel. He then started to peel one of the oranges and eat it, asking who would like to enjoy the other two. Two teens quickly approached him, taking the oranges, and eating them as the room thunderously applauded. His point? We waste a lot of food that could otherwise help to feed the hungry.

Danny Siegel explains, “I can tell a person’s age by how he or she finishes this sentence, often heard in childhood from a parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle: ‘Eat everything on your plate because they are starving in...’ Older people answer, ‘Europe.’ Others say, ‘China,’ ‘India,’ ‘Africa,’ ‘Biafra,’ ‘Ethiopia,’ or ‘Right down the street.’ Whatever the answer, we can do something about that, far beyond what we ever considered possible, and in a relatively simple manner.”

The mitzvah of bal tashchit tells us that we are not allowed to senselessly waste food. According to a study released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 1997, Americans waste 97 billion pounds of edible food each year – one-fourth of all the food produced for edible consumption. This is not one of the more difficult commandments to achieve mind you. Bringing two bags of canned goods to Kol Nidrei is part of our mission, volunteering in a soup kitchen another, not wasting food is another, and there is yet more we can do to make an impact.

Hunger and poverty are not new subjects for us Jews. Let’s look to the Torah for some examples from our people’s history. Due to famines in the land, our patriarch Abraham was forced to go to Egypt to find food. His son, Isaac, went to the land of Avimelech, king of the Philistines, in Gerar during bad times. And his grandchildren, the children of Jacob, went to Egypt to buy grain as their time of great economic fortune and agricultural growth came to an end. Naomi and her family fled Israel and went to Moab in the Book of Ruth. There were also famines during the reigns of King David and King Ahab. We are certainly no strangers to hard economic times. It was the great prophet Jeremiah, who declared, “Happier were the victims of the sword than the victims of hunger, who pined away, stricken by want of the yield of the field.”

God, acting as a God of compassion, sides with the poor and the oppressed. We must take God’s lead. In Egypt, God intervened on behalf of our ancestors, the poor, desolate slaves. God’s prophets constantly castigated those who oppressed the needy. How can we ever forget the concept of B’tzelem Elohim – that we are all created in the Divine image? We must act in God’s ways – the notion of imitatio dei – striving to be as compassionate and kind as the Holy One.

Maimonides, in fact teaches that the entire Torah is designed to guide us on the path of compassion. He writes, “The purpose of the laws of the Torah is to promote compassion, loving-kindness, and peace in the world.” In the Book of Proverbs, we learn that “the one who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord.” Thus, by helping the needy and the hungry, it is as if we provide the gift of a loan to God.

In the Jewish community, the issues of poverty and hunger have consistently taken a backseat to the other crucial issues that affect us more directly – namely Israel affairs. And while Israel remains on the top of our list as concerned Jewish citizens, the time has come for us to speak out to our elected representatives about the alarming rate of poverty. My good friend and rabbi, Danny Nevins, was invited to the White House this past Monday. And as he explained to me, even if it’s the day after Rosh Hashanah, and you still have your Yom Kippur sermons to write... when the leader of the free world invites you over, you go. When he returned after the one-hour visit with President Bush and a handful of other American rabbis – mostly Orthodox and all but one male, he sent me an e-mail of the experience.

The one section of the three-page e-mail that jumped out at me was the back-and-forth discussion between the only woman in the group and the president on the issue of poverty in our country. Rabbi Amy Schwartzman, of the Reform Temple Rodef Shalom, nearby in Falls Church, was asked what

concerns she had brought to the table. Rather than speak of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the U.S. war on terrorism, she questioned the President on the increasing number of Americans living below the poverty line.

The Jewish newspaper, *The Forward*, reported that she told the President, "Since you came into office, the number of people in poverty has increased by three million. My religious faith, as well as yours, compels us to reach out to people on the fringes of our society, the poor in particular, and we clearly need to be more responsive to this segment of our nation."

Kudos to Rabbi Schwartzman! Israel, terrorism, taxes, abortion, school vouchers... these are all very important issues – issues we are very much concerned about. But, if you are like me, then you know more and more men and women who have become unemployed over the past few years of this economic downturn. And while, these folks might not be living in poverty. And they might not be in dire search of food, we must be charged to fight this new war – the war on poverty and hunger!

A Chassidic tale is told of a great rabbi who is given the privilege of seeing the realms of Heaven and Hell before his death. He was taken first to Hell, where he was confronted with a huge banquet room in the middle of which was a large elegant table covered with a magnificent and crystal. The table was covered from one end to the other with the most delicious foods that the eyes have ever seen or the mouth tasted. And all around the table people were sitting looking at the food... and wailing. It was such a wail that the rabbi had never heard such a sad sound in his entire life and he asked, "With a luxurious table and the most delicious food, why do these people wail so bitterly?" As he entered the room, he saw the reason for their distress. For although each was confronted with this incredible sight before him, no one was able to eat the food. Each person's arms were splinted so that the elbows could not bend. They could touch the food, but they could not eat it. The anguish this caused was the reason for the great wail and despair that the rabbi saw and heard.

He was next shown Heaven, and to his surprise, he was confronted by the identical scene witnessed in Hell: The large banquet room, elegant table, lavish settings, and sumptuous foods. And, in addition, once again everyone's arms were splinted so the elbows could not bend. Here, however, there was no wailing, but rather joy greater than he had ever experienced in his life. For, whereas here too, the people could not put the food into their own mouths, each picked up the food and fed it to another. They were thus able to enjoy, not only the beautiful scene, the wonderful smells, and the delicious foods, but also the joy of sharing and helping one another.

Food is very important to us. And, what we eat says a lot about who we are. It was once said, "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are." Some of us are vegetarian, perhaps for health reasons or for political or ethical reasons. Some of us will only eat organic foods. Some won't eat red meat, or dairy, or fish, or their broccoli. With kashrut too, there are many variations. We Jews certainly focus much attention on what goes into our mouths and into our kitchens and homes.

Food is fundamental to our lives. Eating is an essential act in our existence. But regardless of what we eat, how it was prepared, how it tasted or looked or cost, we must be cognizant of God's role in its creation. We must open our eyes to the "have-nots" among us – to the poverty-stricken. If we're going to be concerned with which SUV model to drive, which brand-name clothes to wear, and which \$400 video game player to buy our kids, then we must be even more concerned, and compassionate about those who just want to ensure their kids have a next meal.

Last month, I read one of those quickie interviews in the back pages of *Newsweek Magazine*. It was with the star of HBO's *Sex and the City*, Sarah Jessica Parker. I'll tell you that I do watch the show, but I was extremely troubled by this interview. Let me provide you with some of the Q and A, so you can see for yourselves what prompted my reaction to this obscene commentary.

Question: There's a fire at your home, God forbid, and you can save only one pair of shoes. Manolos or Jimmy Choos? Answer: I don't wear Jimmy Choos. I only ever wear Manolos. (Manolos are women's shoes whose average price is in the \$2-3,000 range). Question: OK. A pair of Manolos or a Kelly bag? Answer: Oh, well, that's like "Sophie's Choice." That's an impossible situation. (Sophie's Choice was a Holocaust film based on a book by the same name, in which she had to choose to save only one of her two children). Question: OK. All the shoes or the dog? Answer: The dog. Jesus Christ! Do I appear to be a terribly superficial person, with all these questions about clothes? I have deeper thoughts than what I might put on that day. I'm not my character. I don't want people to think I spend the better part of the day deciding where to shop.

Was this real person Sarah Jessica Parker speaking? Or was she actually in character? I'd like to think that she was just trying to create good Hollywood buzz and promote her show a little, but this disgusting interview was found in the same pages of a magazine devoted to world news – and the news of the world includes poverty and hunger these days. I'm sure that she and her husband, Matthew Broderick, are very charitable with their time and money, but she certainly comes off as purely materialistic and overly self-indulgent in this interview.

In the Torah, we have the command to give thanks to God, our Creator, for the food we eat. V'achalta v'savata u'verachta – "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God." This is the basis for reciting the Grace after Meals – Birkat Hamazon. The Kotzker Rebbe taught that saying Birkat Hamazon is the fundamental mitzvah in that all of us are capable to feel grateful that the earth produced food for us to eat. We must feel grateful to God for the food we have. Too many Americans, however, are faced with the dire alternative of having no food for which to be grateful.

We put a lot of time and thought into family recipes, restaurant menus, caterers, and diets. But we need to be thankful that we have food to eat. When, at the Pesach Seder, we say, "let all who are hungry come and eat," we must really concentrate on what it is we are saying. Do we really mean that? Would anyone here invite a homeless person to their dining room table for their Seder? While we debate which restaurant to go to, others are struggling to survive their hunger. It is estimated that one billion people in the world suffer from hunger and malnutrition. And in our nation, where so many live in extravagance and overindulgence, there are more and more men and women falling into poverty each day. What will we do?

In Loudoun County, where we have so many wineries, I am certain that you often hear talk of which wine will complement this or that meal. Does this red go well with that steak, and so forth. Well, we can all complement our meals, no matter what is being served, with some tzedakah. A charitable gift – no matter what size – to an organization whose mission it is to provide food for the hungry is always sure to go well with your next meal. Take Mazon's advice and donate 3% of the cost of feeding your guests at your next simcha (bar or bat mitzvah, wedding, etc.). Call up an organization dedicated to giving relief to those in dire straits, and tell them you want to help in any way they need. Doing our part to help fight poverty in our midst will make us feel more connected to our fellow human beings, and to God.

We learn in the Book of Proverbs to speak up, judge righteously, champion the poor and the needy. We are always in a rush to eat. We eat in our cars. We eat while we work at the office. We want our food faster and faster. But, let us keep in mind that there are so many people who have no food. Just as food is the sustenance of life, recognizing that God has provided for our needs becomes the sustenance of our spiritual and religious lives. Gandhi once said, "For the poor, God comes in the form of bread." In this New Year, let us be the bearers of the gift of godliness to the poor among us. And let us say Amen.

I wish you all a meaningful fast and G'mar Chatimah Tovah – May you be sealed in the Book of Life.