

“After the Hurricane...”

Part Three

“How Much Are You Worth?”

A Sermon for Kol Nidre Eve 5766

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## I.

With Kol Nidre still reverberating in our ears, will you converse with me about something perhaps more intimate than what we considered on Rosh HaShanah? We've spoken together, asking, after the hurricane, "How are you spending your time?" and "What are your doubts and your affirmations as a Jew?"

That timeless chant we Jews sing on this night, with the Torah Scrolls held before us, testifies across the centuries to Judaism's insistence that God's world remains sacred because we remain accountable for our actions.

Did you know that while on one hand, every Jew is instructed to place a piece of paper into one pocket, upon which is written:

All flesh is grass and we are but frail and  
impermanent.

Still in the other pocket, take out that other note on which is inscribed:

Make way, make way, for the human – created  
in the very image of the Lord of the universe.

Finite, frail, vulnerable – our Judaism defines us all as born B'tzalem Elohim: in the image of God. So, here's what I propose we talk about for the next few minutes: after the hurricane, how much are you worth? That's getting pretty personal, isn't it? My point is – No, Judaism's point is: there are all kinds of worth and values.

Conventionally, I imagine such a calculation is a favorite pastime for many. I mean adding up the value of one's assets: equities, fixed income instruments, dividends, annuities, and appreciation of property – or unfortunately, the reverse!

Well, after the hurricane, maybe it's not such a favorite pastime. "How much are you worth?" It's a question I can't ask without replaying that brutal scene in *It's a Wonderful Life* when old man Potter turns to desperate George Baily and, with obscene delight, opines, "Why George, you're worth more dead than alive."

But, we know all along, even before Clarence gets his wings, that George Baily is, in fact, the richest man in Bedford Falls. Why? Because he's given so much to his neighbors and family that his life is devoted to meaningful work even more than earning money.

Want to read a good book? Pick up *More Money Than God*, by my colleague, Rabbi Steven Leder of the posh Wilshire Boulevard Temple. In this fine book, he courageously maintained to his congregation – one with many of Los Angeles's wealthiest and prominent Jewish business and entertainment moguls – he maintained that one must above all live a rich life without losing one's soul. Rabbi Leder said,

Money, I believe, is neither good nor bad. It's how you earn it, what you do with it, and how you treat others who are less fortunate...

Let me echo Rabbi Leder in reminding us all on this Kol Nidre Eve that for our Judaism, money is not evil, and having it is certainly no sin. Still, let's be candid: money impacts our families, friends, loves, and ethics; our labors and compulsions; and, to a great extent, our feelings of self-worth.

Toward that end, most of us will work harder and smarter and do our best to deserve our bosses' appreciation in a material fashion.

But you know, the problem presents itself when we lose our perspective and allow money to become the god we serve. Raging materialism leads to poverty of the spirit, and to an unrelieved sense of life's emptiness.

We can delude ourselves into thinking that the trappings of success – like the house, the car, our travel, and our titles – that outer shell we present to the world – that it all translates into who we really are. And it is at that moment when we have truly lost our way! Heschel puts it this way: “To have more is not to be more.” If we don't understand that “After the Hurricane,” we've lost more than we know!

They tell the story of the poor man who is walking in the forest while conversing with God. He asks, “Lord, what is a million years to You?”

God replies, “My son, a million years is like a second to Me.”

The man then asks, “Lord, what is a million dollars to You?”

God replies, “My son, a million dollars is less than a penny to Me.”

So, with that, the fellow summons his courage and hopefully asks, “So, what do you think, Lord? Could I have a million dollars?”

To which, God replies, “Sure, in a second!”

Some weeks ago, (before our worlds changed and when everything was so beautifully normal!) I named a beautiful baby standing by his mother and father who proudly held him. I noticed that both of the baby's hands were configured into tight fists! And I remembered the touching Midrash that teaches how –

A baby enters the world with hands clenched, as if to say, ‘The world is mine; I shall grab it.’  
But, a person leaves this world with hands open, as if to say, ‘I can take nothing with me.’

And so, after the hurricane, let me ask you this: for what are your hands clenched right now?

We've seen it all so clearly – how the things we prize and cherish are subject to the whims of nature and to the uncertainty of fate. All that lasts is faith, family, and

friendship. So, with what material benefits we do control and possess for a little while, let us put them to a purpose beyond ourselves and our own ego needs. It's all on temporary loan anyway! No pockets in shrouds!

A minister was three hours late coming home one evening. His wife was furious: "Where have you been?" she asked.

The exhausted man attempted to explain, "I was at a meeting trying to convince the rich to give to the poor."

Feeling more sympathetic, his wife asked, "And were you successful?"

Well, he admitted, "I was half successful. So far, the poor have agreed to accept!"

Remember Maimonides' eight rungs of Tzedakah? Not a bad reminder for us on this Kol Nidre Eve. Yes, we have suffered loss, but look around you and even beyond you – others have suffered far greater and bitterer loss than we.

1. To give grudgingly and with regret Says the Rambam, the 1<sup>st</sup> level of tzedakah is the lowest rung.
2. The second is to give less than you should, but at least with a modicum of grace.
3. Give what is proper, but only after being asked.
4. To give even before being asked.
5. To give without knowing the recipient, but the recipient knows the donor.
6. To give anonymously.
7. Neither the giver nor the receiver knows the identity of the other.
8. The highest level of Tzedakah is to help someone to become self-supporting by finding them gainful employment.

## II.

Here's a point made by Rabbi Steven Leder that I hope we'll come back to some day. He admonishes us to "Teach our children well, not wealth, because, "The surest way to make life difficult for a child is to make life too easy."

When did you learn how tough it is to earn a dollar? Did you have to earn an allowance? Did you work during the summers? Do you think it's true that "we value less what is easy to come by?"

People are talking about Laura Jean Stargardt, who, after attending a dozen B'nai Mitzvahs, insisted that her parents agree to have one for her. Only problem here – the Stargardts are Methodists.

Affluent Christian children now want what their Jewish friends have: professionally produced, theme Bar and Bat Mizvah blowouts! In her book *The Golden Ghetto*, author Jesse O'Neill diagnosed the problem that sometimes arises when inner-meaning and true values are overshadowed by gross excess. O'Neill calls it "affluenza."

### III.

Here's another observation to note. Tell me, who are the happiest people you know? We know that for all of its benefits – and there are plenty – wealth in and of itself doesn't assure joy or satisfaction.

Some who set out to become millionaires will very quickly learn that a million dollars isn't enough. Expenses rise with income and they will need more and more. The Sages ask, "Who is rich?" And their insightful answer is, "The one who his satisfied with his or her lot."

For many of us, after the hurricane, we will hurt. Some adjustors will not be generous. In addition, there are times when families are torn asunder over the matters of business and finance. One of our Judaism's highest levels of kindness is reserved for the person who makes peace between those who are quarreling. And what better night than this for us to forgive another whom we believe to have wronged us?

What family doesn't have its issues? If yours doesn't, count yourself especially fortunate. Many are torn by betrayals, deceit, grudges, by inheritance issues, and ongoing power struggles.

A rabbi colleague, Chaim Listfield, received this letter a while back from a member named Francine:

Dear Rabbi, I have one brother; we have been estranged for 10 years. I've decided it's time for me to heal. I'm going to call my brother...He lives on Long Island, he's married, and now has two kids. I want us to make up... I just want you to know about this. Maybe you can say a prayer and hope that this will work out.

Of course, the Rabbi called to encourage his member's effort, and she returned a call days later with the good news that her 41-year-old brother Adam was indeed receptive and gracious. They spoke awkwardly at first, but after a while, they set a time to get her children and his together – which they did, two weeks later with enormous joy and tears of happiness. Well, that day was September 9, 2001.

Two days later, Francine called her Rabbi. She cried:

I think something is terribly wrong. My brother works at the World Trade Center. He works for a firm called Cantor Fitzgerald.

You and I will pray tonight and tomorrow for another year of life! But we lives day by day as frail, imperfect, and vulnerable souls. After the hurricane – are we smarter? How much are you worth? You're a child of God! You are priceless!

Picture this: the psychiatrist's office. The therapist with pad and pen sits in the chair at the head of the couch upon which the patient reclines. The patient tries his best to achieve a real breakthrough. With one hand lifted as if to reach for a truth, his certainty dissolves when he says aloud, "Right. Money isn't everything – what's the other thing again?"

Well, what are you worth? What am I worth? A whole lot more than our assets in dollars, I trust! After the hurricane:

We are rich – rich with family, rich with a faith  
and a tradition which teaches us about the wealth  
of friendship.

We ought to spend less time counting our money  
and much more counting our blessings.

It's Kol Nidre Eve – After the hurricane:

Forgive! Forget! Let it go! It doesn't matter  
profoundly! Join me, won't you, in determining to  
live the richer life – ever more grateful simply to  
love and to be loved?

Amen