

The Things that Matter: A Spiritual Tool Kit for Tough Times

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Whether or not we realize it each of us carries around a tool box with the things we need for dealing with life's challenges. We may not be able to fix a sink or change a tire, but family and faith, life stories and experiences can provide us with the resources for confronting and addressing life's unpleasant surprises. Of course, sometimes we need to turn to others for support and advice but we're more resilient than we realize. So I decided to bring my tool kit with me to shul today.

Hmm... Let's see what we have in here.... (Rummage through the box...tooth brush, duck tape, family picture, prayer book, a small torah, a teddy bear, a chocolate bar and a picture of Mom....)

Mom is no longer here but if she were I suspect I know what she would say. She used to quote her parents all the time: "Rich or poor: it's good to have money!" Those were their words but the truth is, she knew this from life experience. In 1929, when Mom was only 15 years old, the depression struck. Her parents didn't have much and now they had even less. America hardly seemed like the land of opportunity this new American family.

A few years later, still living in a two room apartment with her parents and three siblings on the Lower East Side, Mom dropped out of high school to help support her family. She was the oldest and, besides, she was just a girl, so 'she didn't need an education.' That was her parents' attitude and mom was a dutiful daughter. Mom never quite got over the injustice of being robbed of an education. She didn't talk about the depression often, but it colored every decision she made for the rest of her life.

On the other hand, it was during those years that mom made her best friends – friendships that lasted a lifetime. She would speak of her years working in Woolworths for a pittance. She didn't earn much but the friends that she made became 'aunt' and 'uncle' to my sister and me even though they weren't actually relatives. I always knew I could call Hedda and Sol, or Sylvia and Lou, or Beattie and Al. They'd do just about anything for me.

I don't want to idealize the depression; they were hardly the 'good old days.' But somehow our parents or grandparents managed to survive the dark years because they were surrounded by family and community to whom they could turn.

This past year we have experienced our own economic woes. As I look out at our congregation, I can almost hear a collective sigh. This has been a tough year. It's been a year of uncertainty and fear, a year in which we were not sure how we would make it. Plans, made long ago, had to be changed and some found themselves struggling to make ends meet. How many of you here know someone who was out of work this year? How many know someone whose work hours were cut back? How many people were worried about health insurance and retirement because of the economic downturn?

Disaster might be a strong word but we shouldn't underestimate the troubles of the past year. We drive around Oceanside and we see dozens of houses for sale. We witnessed the collapse of our most

prominent investment banks, the failure of giant insurers, and the nationalization of many businesses. Greed came home to roost as our unrealistic exuberance gave way to disaster. The “bubble burst.” And we witnessed the dark underside of America’s economy - people like Bernard Madoff and corporations who took advantage irrational expectations to bilk people out of billions. America once seemed impervious to failure. We wrongly assumed things would get better.

Of course, things aren’t nearly as bad as the depression, but misfortune is relative. We tend to experience deprivation based on what we we’re used to rather than what it actually is. And we’re soft – having lived in relative affluence, we are not used to finding that there are limits. There has also been a culture of entitlement in our society. Things like this weren’t supposed to happen. So I hear people saying - maybe not in so many words - “How could this happen **to me**?”

So what do we find in our spiritual tool box. The first resource we find is perspective. I find myself thinking my grandparent’s words, “Rich or poor, it’s good to have money.” They knew that Jews have never idealized poverty. They knew that our tradition has a lot to say about how to live through hard economic times. It provides us with a spiritual tool kit for dealing with challenges. It reminds us of the things that really count: family and faith, meaningful work and community. Our tradition challenges us to keep the things that count in perspective. In the end, what matters is not what we have but who we are and what we strive to be.

At times like this, I think of Tevye. Surely you remember his famous words: to be poor is no shame, but it’s no great honor either! What’s a life without *parnasah*, without a decent livelihood? The sages were pragmatic. The Talmud says: “No portion in life is harder to bear than poverty, for one who is crushed by poverty is as one beset by all the afflictions in the world.” The sages realized that without a modicum of wealth, it would be hard to live a good life. However, wealth should be a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Of course few, maybe none, of us are really poor. I don’t see anyone giving up their cell phones in our congregation or wondering where their next meal will come from... The issue for us is not so much poverty as it is insecurity...

In Deuteronomy we find two statements about wealth and poverty that can give us some perspective. First, we read: “There shall be no needy among you – since the Lord your God will bless you...” A few verses later, “For there will never cease to be poor in your land, (therefore) open your hand to the needy...” So which way is it: “there shall be no poor among you,” or “the needy will never cease in your land?” While the first statement reflects an ideal – a world without poverty, the second is the harsh reality of what life is. Poverty and wealth are part of a never ending cycle – it won’t disappear but we have the ability to do something about it. The Talmudic sage, Rabbi Elazar ben Kappar said: “A person should beseech God’s mercy concerning poverty, for if he does not come into it, his son may; and if his son does not come into it, his son’s son may, as R. Ishmael taught-- poverty is a wheel that goes around and around in the world.” *Tzedakah* is not charity but a righteous way of living and giving. We help others and hopefully others will be there to help us.

Our tradition has long acknowledged that poverty and wealth are a part of life and a spiritual challenge! Rabbi Michael Paley writes that even patriarchs also faced economic ups and downs. Abraham was homeless in a time of famine but later we learn that God blessed him “with everything.” Isaac struggled to make do when he was attacked by neighboring tribes but was blessed a hundredfold; Jacob was a penniless fugitive but also a wealthy man; and Joseph’s saga is the classic story of rags to

riches. Our tradition is neither embarrassed by our ancestors' misfortune nor complacent about their good fortune; both are signs of God's workings. Each state of being creates its own challenges.

In tough economic times, then, we need some perspective. We could learn a lesson from Nuhum 'Gamzo,' a colorful character in the Talmud. Nuhum was called Gamzo because whatever he faced in his life, he would say, *gam su latov*, "This too will be for good." In good times he would say, "*gam zu latov*," and when things weren't so good he would say, "This too will be for good." He understood that wealth is measured not by what one has but by what one does. It doesn't define us! Often it is attitude and not aptitude that makes the difference between success and failure. "Who is rich," the sages ask, *Hasomeach b'helko*, – "One is happy with his portion!"

The second insight we can find in our spiritual tool box is the insight that it is the simple, fundamental, blessings that count. In the High Holiday liturgy we repeatedly ask to be blessed with life. We say: *zochraynu l'hayim* "Remember us for life, Sovereign who delights in life" and *Katveinu b'sefer hayim tovim*, "May we be inscribed in the book of a good life, and peace." Do we ever stop to think about what a blessing it is to be alive?

But we place so many conditions and expectations on 'life.' Like the *Bubbe*, sitting on the beach with her darling little grandson. Dressed in a sailor outfit, the little boy was playing in the sand when a giant wave washed up on the beach and carried him out to sea. *Bubbe* jumped up and began to scream, "*Gevalt*, please God don't take my darling grandson!! I'll do anything – I'll give charity, I'll go to Shul!" A moment later a wave washed up and put the boy down right where he had been before dressed in his sailor's outfit but without his sailor's cap. *Bubbe* look up and said, "He had a hat!!" Are our expectations realistic? We expect – we demand - a certain 'quality of life.' We forget – just to be alive is a blessing. We awake each morning with the words *Modeh ani lifanekha*; "I'm grateful to you, living God, for restoring my soul to me; you are faithful beyond measure."

What should we strive for? The best definition of a 'good life' is captured in a prayer we recite each month announcing Rosh Hodesh, the new moon. "May it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, to renew our lives...Grant us long life, a peaceful life with goodness and blessing, sustenance and physical vitality, free from shame and reproach, a life of abundance and honor, a life in which there is love of *Torah* and fear of God – in which our hearts desires are fulfilled for good." It's no accident that this prayer couples abundance with honor, and sustenance with dignity. To have plenty at the cost of one's self respect is not a blessing. The author of this prayer understood that wealth must be accompanied by our innate humanity. We don't live to work; we work to live.

Finally, maybe the most important tool in our spiritual tool box is generosity. In tough times we must remember that we're not alone; that we're more than individuals or members of a single family; we live in community and we live in a global village. We have a responsibility to others. There's a natural tendency at times like this to withdraw from the world. While charity begins at home it doesn't end there. It is no accident that America is debating the question of health care reform just now. How can I live with myself if I have health care while 46 million people in the richest country on earth can't afford this basic necessity? What are we to say when we consider that one out of eight people in Nassau County can't afford insurance?

This is more than partisan politics; the character of our country will be measured by the way we care for our most vulnerable. Those were the words with which President Obama several weeks ago in a live telephone conference to Conservative and Reform rabbis. Now, I don't have answers to the

complex economic and political questions affected by the issue of health care but I do know that we have a responsibility to care for all the people in our country whether or not they have a passport.

Again I find myself turning to our heritage for answers in these tough times. The Torah safeguards the rights of the stranger, the orphan and the widow more than any other group in society— precisely because they lack the means to protect themselves. Maimonides listed health care first in a list of the ten most important services which a community must provide. (*Hilchot De'ot 4:23*)

My mother taught me that poverty and wealth cannot be measured by bank accounts or stock portfolios but by the richness of our relationships, the meaning and purpose of our lives, and our sense of community. In giving there is living. Rich or poor, it's good to know that we're not alone. Rich or poor, it's good to know there are people to whom we can turn and who can turn to us. Rich or poor it's good to know that we live in a community where people are judged not by what they have but by who they are. Such relations don't just happen; we create them by creating such a community. It happens through work hard and caring attention.

The *Gerer Rebbe* questioned a disciple: “How is *Moshe Ya'akov* doing?” The disciple didn't know. “What?” shouted the Rebbe, “You pray under the same roof? You pray from the same book? You serve the same God? Yet you dare to tell me you don't know how *Moshe Yaakov* is, whether he needs help or advice or comfort. How can that be?” This is the essence of a life - to share in each other's life, not to leave one another alone – either in sorrow or in joy.

God willing, the recession will be a thing of the past. But as the Torah tells us, our responsibilities to others will never disappear. There have been efforts in the Jewish community to reach out in the past year and offer assistance in these trying times. One such program, Connect2care, sponsored by UJA Federation, is making a great effort to help people redirect their lives build a secure future. There are bookmarks on your seats with information on this program – I hope you'll either use it or pass it on to others. Turning to one another should not be an embarrassment but how we experience community. It's why we're here. This fall, our congregation will join with other congregations in Nassau County in a new program, the Interfaith Hospitality Network. This program invites synagogues and churches to provide housing for homeless families. And in our own congregation we need to redouble our efforts in making people feel safe and secure in tough times. Our efforts must begin right here at home – in our attitudes, in our values, in our perspective and in our concern for each other.

There are some words in my tool box. They appear over the ark in the sanctuary: *V'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha*, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” They remind of the things that matter most. In these challenging times they are not a just a promise but a challenge for each and every one of us.

So what's in your tool box? It is time like this that we need to look into our tool box and find the spiritual resources with which to face life's challenges. To recognize that we're not alone, that life has its ups and downs and that we must redouble our efforts in becoming a community. Its times like this that we need to express gratitude and hope, strength and direction.

It's all there, in your tool box, if you'll just open it!

Shanah Tov