

MAZON High Holy Day Resources: Prompts for Clergy + Educators

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MAZON Sermon Seeds + Service Interstitial Prompts

Rabbi Michael Rothbaum, JCJM '19

Rosh HaShanah, Day One — Gen. 21: the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael

- While Hagar has been a faithful servant to the family, the story explains that Abraham expels Hagar and her son with very little notice
- Despite her dedication and service, Abraham only gives Hagar some bread and water
- The meager rations are quickly exhausted
- The story highlights the problems of poor families
- Often, families on the margins find themselves in economic trouble through no fault of their own
- Despite this, poor families are often seen as having character defects — lazy, lacking initiative, so on
- God's non-judgmental assistance to Hagar and Ishmael is a model for us to provide for poor and hungry because of the Jewish demand to create love and justice.

Rosh HaShanah, Day Two — Gen. 22: the binding of Isaac

- Isaac's life is in danger, though he is never consulted regarding the decision
- Abraham intends to put his son through an ultimate sacrifice, for a vision that doesn't include Isaac
- Many Jewish commentators are horrified by this possible destruction of life
- There is a parallel for poor people in the US
- Cuts to food, housing, and medical assistance threaten the lives of poor Americans, though they are almost never consulted regarding such decisions
- Political forces sacrifice poor people for a vision that values low taxes and deregulation over the lives of poor people
- American Jews should insist that our political leaders pursue a vision that includes all residents of our country, regardless of economic status

Kol Nidre

- The traditional Kol Nidre prayer asks God for a second chance
- We've made ndarim — vows, promises — both to God and to the people in our lives
- Since we're fallible people, we were not always able or willing to fulfill these promises
- Kol Nidre is a reminder — just because we fell short, doesn't mean we shouldn't keep trying
- As Jews, we are required to provide basic sustenance to all people, in the form of tzedek, a just distribution of wealth
- With millions of Americans in poverty, it's clear that we have fallen short
- On Kol Nidre, we declare that we cannot give in to fatalism or despair
- We should recommit to fulfilling the promise our people and our country have left unfulfilled to America's poor

Yom Kippur Morning — Leviticus 16: the two goats

- The reading describes a ritual of expiation
- Two goats are selected: one sacrificed for God, one for Azazel
- The method of selection is random — it has nothing to do with the quality of the goats
- The reading reminds us of the randomness of life
- Many of us have been randomly born into families of means
- Others have been randomly born into poverty
- In a country in which economic mobility is increasingly impossible, birth is becoming destiny
- The Yom Kippur reading reminds us that much of our fate is due to happenstance rather than merit
- We are horrified to live in a country in which some citizens are randomly sacrificed on the altar of economic injustice, deregulation, and cuts to basic material needs
- As Jews, we need to work toward the vision of a country that provides for all its residents, regardless of the economic class into which they happen to be born

Text Study

Rosh Hashanah

Rosh Hashanah, as do many Jewish holidays, has a deep connection to food. Food is a central and deeply symbolic celebration of the New Year. At MAZON, we talk a lot about food as a representation of identity. Everyone should have access to the foods that make up their identity; ours go so far as existing in the Shulchan Aruch.

- Noam Zion, “*Seder Rosh Hashanah: Symbolic Foods and New Year Wishes*”
 - Rosh Hashana[h]’s evening meal may encompass an ancient custom of eating symbolic foods, a mini-seder, if you will. The family tastes (or at least holds up for a New Year’s wish) a variety of foods whose name, shape or color remind us of our greatest hopes for the New Year... Since the days of the Talmud the foods on the holiday table have been transformed into informal symbols of our New Year wishes. Best-known are the apples dipped in honey that symbolize a sweet year. Yet even the most ordinary vegetables, seasonal fruits and miscellaneous foods provide us an occasion to wish away our fears and verbalize our deepest hope.
- Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim, Rosh Hashanah 583:1
 - On Rosh Hashanah a person should be accustomed to eating fenugreek, a leek or cabbage, beets, dates and gourd. And (for example) when eating fenugreek (roobia in Hebrew) one should say, “May it be God’s will that our merits increase (yirbu).”
- Rosh Hashanah 16b:6-7
 - And Rabbi Yitzḥak said: A person’s sentence is torn up on account of four types of actions. These are: Giving charity, crying out in prayer, a change of one’s name, and a change of one’s deeds.
- Rabbi Alan Lew, “*This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*”
 - The Talmud claims that these activities will actually cause the decree to be torn up (*ma’kiriin*)...The liturgy, however, makes a very different claim, namely that prayer, righteousness and Teshuvah will not change *what* happens to us; rather, they will change *us*.

Yom Kippur

Where Rosh Hashanah's symbolism is attached to consumption of food, Yom Kippur is deeply connected to the lack thereof. Every day, millions of Americans go hungry and are forced to skip meals because of circumstance. On Yom Kippur, we choose to skip meals and go hungry as part of our Jewish celebration, but we are blessed to have the choice. Even if our hunger lasts only a day, it is enough to make us aware of the challenge hunger presents to those who experience it. This year, take your experience with hunger and turn it into a meaningful action.

- Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "[Left- and Right-Brain Judaism](#)"
 - Here is the Torah telling us to fast, atone and purify ourselves, and here is the Prophet telling us that none of this will work unless we engage in some kind of social action, or at the very least behave honourably toward others. Torah and haftarah are two voices that do not sound as if they are singing in harmony.
- [Reform Judaism Social Action Guide](#), "*Make your fast meaningful*"
 - On Yom Kippur, it is customary to fast to free ourselves from our daily needs. As we refrain from pleasure and deny our bodies nourishment, we hope to draw closer to God. During the climax of our worship on Yom Kippur morning, we read the stirring words of the prophet Isaiah, who challenges us to use this fast day as a reminder that as long as hunger and want still exist in our world, our fasts and prayers are incomplete.
 - "Is this the fast I seek? A day of self-affliction?... Is not THIS the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into your house?" (Isaiah 58:5-7).
- Abby Liebman, MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger CEO
 - Each year, in the hours before Yom Kippur concludes, we read the story of Jonah and the whale. We are reminded how, in his time of peril, Jonah found kavanah (clarity of purpose), in his mission to help those in need. We read this story at a moment when we find ourselves at our hungriest, thirstiest, and most tired, when we are experiencing our own moment of peril. Whether we are reflecting on our personal choices, neighbors in need,

or the challenges facing the broader community, we, like Jonah, have a moment in the belly of a whale — a moment to set our intentions and clarify our purpose for the year ahead.

Texts with Reflection + Discussion Questions

Rosh Hashanah

- Genesis 21:14-16
 - Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, “Let me not look on as the child dies.” And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.
 - Hagar’s experience in the desert mirrors that of millions of men, women, and children.
 - Who are you, in this story? Has that answer changed in your lifetime?
 - How do we balance our obligation to alleviate suffering against our faith in God’s ability to provide?
 - What is our obligation – as individuals, as members of family or synagogue or school, and as a nation?
 - To whom do we owe that obligation?
- Genesis 21:18-19
 - “Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.
 - In promising to make the lowly Ishmael into a “great nation,” God acknowledges that no person is without intrinsic worth.
 - How do we move beyond seeing impoverished individuals as victims and objects of pity – or a product of their (implied bad) choices? Further, how do we see and change the systems that created the circumstances that keep people impoverished?
 - How do we ensure people are empowered as change agents in their own lives?

Yom Kippur

- Isaiah 58:7-9, [*“From the Sources: Texts on Jewish Social Justice” by AJWS*](#)
 - Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy healing shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee, the glory of the LORD shall be thy rearward. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD will answer; thou shalt cry, and He will say: 'Here I am.'
 - What attitude is Isaiah commanding us to have about feeding the poor? What benefit does the charitable person receive?
 - How does this change your view of tzedakah? Do you feel as though you are the recipient of blessing when you do acts of charity?
 - How does Isaiah build on this concept? What does the partnership between God and humanity entail? What kind of redemption does feeding the poor bring? What does redemption mean to you?

Secular Texts

- **Joanne Samuel Goldblum & Colleen Shaddox**, *Broke in America: Seeing, Understanding, and Ending U.S. Poverty*
 - “The idea of happy, broccoli-eating children comes with a host of assumptions: An adult who has the time and energy to cook dinner. A store nearby that sells broccoli, or transportation to get to such a store. A refrigerator, a stove (or at least a microwave), running water, a knife, cutting board, and other kitchen appliances. And finally, the adult responsible for grocery shopping must either be certain that the kids will eat the broccoli or flush enough to be willing to take a chance that the vegetable will go to waste. Those are a lot of assumptions.”
- **Rachie Weisberg**, an antihunger advocate
 - “Snickers ran a commercial where a bunch of young men are playing football with an irritated older woman. The scene is confusing at first, but, as soon as the woman bites into the Snickers, she “morphs” back into her original self—a young man. The Snickers tagline then runs across the screen stating, “You’re not [you] when you’re hungry.” While this is a silly example, the overwhelming stress associated with hunger is no laughing matter. Unfortunately, food insecure parents are often forced to make the decision between feeding their children and going hungry themselves.”
- **Jean Mayer**, a nutrition scientist appointed by President Richard Nixon to convene a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health.
 - “Of all the dumb ways of saving money, not feeding children is the dumbest.”
- **Leon Howell**, reviewing *Sweet Charity*, by Janet Poppendieck
 - “‘My argument is that this massive charitable endeavor serves to relieve pressure for more fundamental solutions,’ Poppendieck writes. The proliferation of feeding efforts gives us religious comfort and assuages our guilt. It deceives us into believing that personal charity is an adequate

response to social and economic disruptions. It allows government to shirk its duty to promote the common good. Because feeding programs are so demanding, they exhaust those most deeply concerned about poor people and divert them from dealing with the root causes of poverty.”

- **Janet Poppendieck**, *Sweet Charity: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*
 - “By defining the problem as 'hunger', the emergency food system is helping to direct our attention away from the more fundamental problem of poverty, and the even more basic problem of inequality.”
- **Samuel Johnson**, a writer from the 1700s
 - “I have found the world kinder than I expected, but less just.”

Rosh Hashanah D'var Torah
Atem Nitzavim: Standing Together Against Hunger
By Rabbi Erin Glazer

Originally posted by [T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights](#)

Imagine the scene. Groups of men, from tribal leaders to woodchoppers and water-drawers, standing in the same place. Elders interspersed with officials and women with babies on their hips. Children running in and out, weaving between the people, even the stranger within the camp, all gathered together on this day.

Atem Nitzavim. You stand this day, all of you.

“You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God... to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God, which Adonai your God is concluding with you this day.”

On the day when the covenant with God was established, the whole community was present, all stood together, each person was part of the story.

It makes sense that we read this parashah just days before Rosh Hashanah. We, too, are preparing to stand together with the community, with the old and the young, before God. To affirm our part in the covenant, to share our stories.

Atem Nitzavim. You stand this day, all of you.

All?

Who might be missing? Whose stories might not be told?

Dylan is a fourteen-year-old from Kentucky. This is his story. “It was the best time, when my mom had a job. I actually enjoyed life. I used to get to do whatever. Now, I get up in the morning and put on my shoes like anybody else, but when I get to school, I think about losing our house.

My mom got laid off four years ago from her job at the school district. I have a lot of weight on my shoulders. I can't stand our situation. My mom doesn't know it, but I quit baseball so she wouldn't have to spend money on my uniform.

Our food stamps have gone from \$300 to \$200 a month for my mom and me. We're not able to afford healthy foods that some people can. It's usually chips, bologna sandwiches and all that.

We've had to open up canned foods from the pantry that's probably older than me. Eating like this and knowing that your friends are eating regular food makes me feel like I'm not normal. We run out of food some months and I've gone days without sleep because of hunger. The next day, I'll go through class pinching myself, doing stuff to stay awake."

And this is Ashley's story.

"My husband's an E4 Petty Officer on a warship. When he joined the Navy, I didn't think it was going to be all sunsets and roses, but I didn't expect that we'd have to eat ramen seven nights a week because that's what we could afford. We thought being in the military might be a way out of living from paycheck to paycheck, but you know, a full-time clerk at Taco Bell makes more than my husband. It's frustrating that he risks his life to keep us safe from terrorism, misses holidays and birthdays, but doesn't get paid enough to feed the family the way he'd like with healthy, fresh food. I'm shocked that so many military families are standing in line at the food pantry because they really need help."

Food and economic justice are at the heart of T'ruah's work with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and their campaign for fair wages and working conditions in Florida's tomato fields. Gerardo Reyes-Chavez, a CIW member, is spurring us all to action when he asks, "Why do I spend every day harvesting food for the rest of America and then have to stand in line at a food pantry on Thanksgiving for a plate of food?" By insisting upon raising wages and improving working conditions for tomato workers, the CIW moves our conversation about food justice from one of tzedakah to one of tzedek.

Atem Nitzavim. You stand this day, all of you.

We are all in this together. Dylan, Ashley, Gerardo and their families are part of our community. Our covenantal obligation to pursue justice extends to them as well. We need to hear their stories and in so doing be spurred to action.

That's why MAZON developed [This Is Hunger](#), a powerful community engagement program. This interactive experience illuminates the very real and preventable existence of hunger in America, encourages us to raise our voices on behalf of the nearly 50 million Americans who struggle with hunger every day, and ignites our community's commitment to end hunger. Through the stories of real people, presented in their own voices and in their own words, we will challenge our beliefs about who in America struggles with hunger and why and we will be empowered to take action.

Atem Nitzavim. You stand this day, all of you.

This year, may we hear each story and stand together to end hunger once and for all.