



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.

MAZON Sermon Seeds

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