

ROSH HASHANAH 5769 – Second Day
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A Spiritual Lens on Economic Life

Every few years, events in the wider world seem to converge around Rosh Hashanah. The sudden announcement of the Oslo Peace Accords came just before Rosh Hashanah in 1993, and of course the 9/11 attacks – those are just a couple. This year the American financial crisis comes to a head as we gather in our synagogues. How do we talk about it here? What lens does Torah offer?

Even before the past couple of weeks, I was intending to talk about business and economics during the holidays. Through we are focused this week on the financial crisis, another story about business and morality has been unfolding in recent months. It is one that hits particularly close to home for Jews.

Agriprocessors is a company located in Postville, Iowa. You wouldn't know from the name or the location, but it is the largest kosher meat producer in the United States. It supplies 40 percent of the kosher chicken and 60 percent of the kosher beef nationwide, under brand names including Aaron's and Rubashkin's. Four years ago, it was discovered that some workers had been treating cattle in particularly brutal ways that certainly violated the laws of kosher slaughtering. Since that time, more violations came to light – inadequate respiratory precautions for workers against the kinds of bacteria you find in meatpacking, polluted water dumped into the city water system, even contamination of the meat being processed there.

And this past May, the federal government conducted the largest immigration raid in U.S. history at the Agriprocessors factory. About two-thirds of the people who worked there were detained, some 600 people. It's become clear that the company was not only employing illegal labor and child labor, but exploiting it as well. Recently, the company was in court to block the unionizing of the factory, on the grounds that the workers were not in the country legally and therefore had no right to organize.

Wall Street in New York and Postville, Iowa are two separate worlds – well, the owners of the meat factory did come from Brooklyn. Credit finance and meatpacking aren't the same business. But the two sets of stories do have a

lot in common. They've both gotten people asking about questions about the way we do business in this country, questions that are ethical and spiritual. You hear words like greed and trust, when we talk about the mortgage market. And rabbis and other Jewish activists have been increasingly asking whether food that is produced in conditions that are unjust can really be called kosher.

So I want to ask again, how do we talk about these things here, in the synagogue? What lens does Torah offer?

Your first reaction might be: What a strange kind of thing to talk about on Rosh Hashanah. We don't talk derivatives and credit-default swaps in the synagogue – it just doesn't fit. Especially today. For us as modern Jews, the month of Tishrei really seems to separate what we could call the spiritual and material parts of our lives. For two days this week, and another next week, we *withdraw* from the world of the marketplace – the shuk, in Hebrew – and retreat for long days in the synagogue – the shul.

But it wasn't always that way. The Mishnah, our earliest book of *halacha*, of Jewish law, links Rosh Hashanah and Sukkot together as part of a whole season of judgment. Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgment of our deeds and our hearts, and Sukkot is linked to the rains, a judgment about our prosperity in the coming year. They seem different -- cutting branches for our Sukkah seems yet a long time away. But especially this year, the two holidays seem to go together. Ancient Jews would have known to link their prayers and worries about our economic future to our spiritual condition. They would have asked it like this: Have we acted in such a way, as a society, that we deserve the rains that will grow our crops? So too we should be asking the bigger questions: What is the judgment on all the things we do in our society for sustenance? Can we sustain our patterns and choices? Will we be wise enough to change them?

Well, I'm not going to talk about warrants and bailouts, not exactly. But I do want to draw out that older Tishrei experience, and talk about the spiritual dimension of our economic life. I want to go back to the beginning with a capital B – to the Garden of Eden, whose creation we celebrate on Rosh Hashanah. After all, the first command and the first sin were all about acquiring and eating – moral, spiritual, and material all wrapped together. I want to talk about how we cultivate our awareness of the spiritual layer of our everyday, economic life. What happens to us each day, as we buy and as we use – who are we, and who should we be? What would it be like if we really approached the material things in our lives with a spiritual mindset?

What are some things that Jews are doing today to become more spiritually aware in the marketplace?

So first, a story, about the Garden of Eden.

When the first people walked the earth, they had a special type of knowledge, perhaps because they were brand new and so was the earth, or because they were so close to God.

Whenever they looked at a plant or an animal, or even a stone, they could see all the microscopic parts and processes. They could see the changing electron energies that accounted for all the colors and tones of each animal's fur. They could look at a plant and see photosynthesis, watch light and carbon dioxide become oxygen and food. In the sky, they could see always the vapor of water, bonded to the nitrogen, floating up off the four rivers that converged in their special Garden, gathering into wispy clouds. Even a rock showed them the frozen structure of atom linked to atom.

The synthesis of proteins, the extraction of nutrients from the soil by plants – these were as evident to the eyes of the first men and women, as the petals of flowers or the peels of fruits are to us. All they had to do was to fix their gaze for a moment on something, and they could see in this fashion.

It wasn't only the physical and biological. They could also perceive, palpably, the mysterious coursing of life itself, the evident force that kept everything living or moving or synthesizing or holding in place. That mystery had a special hum, a Voice. It wasn't in words, but they could hear it nonetheless, and they felt that it explained the balance among the parasites and the hosts, the two sides of each chemical reaction, the balancing of the earth's blessings among all the beings of the Garden.

And one other thing, maybe the most important of all. Whenever one of the first people would take a particular fruit to eat, or pick up a rock to throw in the river, she would experience – a participation in all those processes she could simultaneously see. The history of that object came together for her at the moment of taking. She could hear the laughter of every child who had ever skipped that rock, or the conversation of everyone who had grabbed an apple off that very branch, or who had watered that tree. This power went back to the first hour after the humans were made in the image of God, when they were so tall that they could see and hear from one end of the earth to the other, possessing same perception as God. To be closer to it all, to be not

apart, that was the first prayer that the humans ever made to God when they became smaller – that they wouldn't lose that vision, and that ability to hear.

No wonder the place was called Eden. The name contained the word *ed*, witness – the people could testify as eyewitnesses to the story of every item, every molecular process and the very secret of life.

There was, of course, one plant where these experiences did not hold. It was right in the middle of the Garden. Sages in the Talmud would report that the forbidden Tree of Knowledge was not a tree but a small field of grain. When a person would fix his gaze there, he would see a blur and hear not a divine voice but a buzz, a whir. Those who approached to pluck a blade of grain would be jolted backward, as if electrocuted, and might even lose awareness for a time. They could wake up a few feet away, having dug a rut or a trench in the ground with a stone, without even knowing it.

The moment the first two people not only took but ate from that grain, their sight and the hearing suddenly became confused and jumbled. Staccato voices, a brief vision – of a farm, then a factory – then complete silence. They looked around and saw only the forms of trees, plants, animals, stones, water. No more microscopic vision, no more histories of each object, no sign of life beyond the fact of things living. The people left the Garden—they had to. They gave themselves names that were a faint memorial to the knowledge they once had. The man, Adam – the material of earth. The woman, Chavah—the mystery of life.

It wasn't until many generations had passed, after Noah's flood, that these things were recalled and retold, among only small bands of no more than thirty-six people at a time, beginning with Noah's great-grandson Ever. These spiritual groups would practice looking and listening, to vines and stones and now even axes and ploughs and even spoons – it was the early days of civilization. They did this as a kind of meditation. They were known as Ivrim, the tribe of Ever, whose name means “beyond”, for they sought to see and hear beyond the surface of the thing at hand. Ivrim means Hebrews. Some say the Ivrim were the instigators of the Tower of Babel, searching for a place where they could see all the exchanges in the commerce of a city in a single glance. But they were not ready, and God did not let the Tower stand.

How do we find our way back to the perception, the seeing and hearing, the testimony of the Garden of Eden or the early bands of Hebrews? Our lives are intertwined more than ever by the market, which is itself an intricate and

invisible wonder. It weaves together people and places across the planet more intricately than most of us can fathom. But though our clothes come from Asia and our vegetables cross the country or the ocean, our commerce mostly obscures the connections and the truth about the things we have come to have and enjoy, that enhance and decorate our lives.

When the *Sefer Hazikhronot*, the book of my life for the past year, is opened, what does God see? How many hours did I spend in the world of commerce—in shops and stores, ordering things on-line, selling the things I do or make? What did those hours contribute, and how does that measure up against the quality of the time I spent with people I care about? The good we did in the world, through acts of kindness – how does that compare to the effects of my consumption? When everything is totaled up, from the perspective of Heaven, what did my year do for the world?

Judaism, it's important to say, is not anti-market or anti-capitalist. Torah even has some nice things to say about greed. There is a wonderful story in the Talmud about the time the Jews captured the *yetzer hara*, the evil self-centered inclination in all our hearts, and put it into prison. Sure enough, no one built a house or bought and sold anything, so they had to set it free. Torah agrees in some ways with Adam Smith that society benefits when each person pursues his own economic self-interest.

But things do go awry. I think there is a common thread to the ways our consuming selves, our wanting selves, lead our whole society off course. It's not just the financial crisis, or the kosher meat scandal. It's the energy crisis and the soil crisis and the water crisis; it's the climate crisis. These aren't separate problems. They all flow from the same source.

I don't think the root of things here is greed or acquisitiveness, which Torah makes a certain peace with. No, what we have is a problem of seeing, and of hearing. When we buy, when we invest, when we hire, we often just don't see or hear enough. If we could reclaim the perception that our ancestors had in the Garden of Eden, we would see the impact that our decisions have, who they affect.

As Jews, we have a spiritual path back to the consciousness of the Garden of Eden, to the story I began with. It's called *bracha* – saying a blessing. Specifically, a set of blessings called *birchot henehenin*, blessings for those who are enjoying or benefiting from something. These one-line blessings are the easiest, least burdensome form of Jewish observance there is, and

they start with some of the most familiar words to us in the whole Hebrew language: *Baruch Atah* – blessed are You.

Of all the words in all the blessings, the most important word is *Atah*. It means “you.” At the moment we are satisfying or indulging ourselves, we deflect attention away from ourselves and even from the food or item at hand. We address a “You.”

Atah -- You -- is God, in this sense: We could hear Your voice in the Garden of Eden, the sound of connections and balance among all things. As I hold this food that I rush to eat, I stretch my awareness to see Your creative power.

Atah -- You -- is more than God. Picking up an apple or a piece of bread or cheese, or a shirt to wear or an iPod to listen to – it’s a private moment. *Atah* is a reminder that there is a you, at least one, who are of the sage of this thing. If it’s an apple from Lull Farm, maybe there are ten *atah*’s; if it’s my shirt, hundreds and maybe thousands. Who grew this, harvested it, transported it, packaged it, put it out where I could find it, sold it...there is a chain of humanity, of *atah*, of people who should not be invisible or anonymous, linked to everything we use or enjoy. And there is much we should know and consider when it comes to the planters, the shippers, the packagers, the sellers. Each one is in a situation that might or might not be fair, might or might not be safe, might or might not be rewarding.

Baruch, blessed, is the bending of the knee in humility. Before we eat, we can say *baruch atah* and for a moment summon the presence of everyone in the chain, just as our earliest ancestors could do. *Atah* means look them in the eye, hear their voices. If we did that, we would see what we really are – participants in all the systems that get us our food, our clothes, our credit. Those systems are not always good, but we won’t think about it unless all the people become *atah*, become a “you” for us at the very moment we are enjoying something, most directed to ourselves.

When I think about the crisis in finance, all this talk about derivatives and securities boils down to this: No *Atah*. When it’s all paper and numbers, the loan officer or the Wall Street trader forgets that there is a person at the start of the story, a person who couldn’t really afford a house or a mutual fund holder who needed to invest the money securely to live in. If you saw those people, heard their dreams and fears, played out their lives – you couldn’t make the decisions that were made.

Well, I don't know anyone here in the room who is responsible for the credit crisis. But we all buy, we all borrow, we mostly invest, and we all eat.

We can use the *bracha* ritual to remind us to look and to hear, to inquire into the people and places we are connected to by our purchases and our investments. Even just two words, *Baruch atah*, would slow us down enough. Jewish law tells us to recite a hundred blessings each day. I bet things would be different if we said just once each day, *Baruch atah*. I ask, who is the someone else who should be heard, at this moment when I do something for myself.

Then what? It's not easy, maybe not possible, to lead lives of complete purity if we take responsibility for every firm and factory we buy from. But what we can do – this is again the simplest thing to do – is to begin to migrate our purchases toward companies that we know live up to high standards.

And they exist. Just this week, the Wall Street Journal mentioned another Jewish businessman who is the opposite of the Rubashkin kosher meat producers. Moses Marx is an Orthodox Jew and the head of a bank called Berkshire Bancorp in New York. His bank's capital reserves were invested in Fannie and Freddie, and wiped out in the recent turmoil. So he poured \$60 million of his own into the bank to keep it afloat. "We have a duty to our customers, our shareholders and our employees," Mr. Marx says. "We're making it good without question. I can't face myself not doing this," Mr. Marx says. "How would I get up in the morning?"

Or in New Hampshire, the Timberland company is another Jewish-owned firm, one that trumpets the idea of "doing well by doing good." Their employees are paid to spend time serving their communities; the company actively tries to reduce its carbon footprint. It was one of the early funders of the City Year service program in Boston. Buy their shoes!

I am proud that the institutions of the Conservative Judaism have a new initiative called *Hekhsher Tzedek*. Literally, the "justice certification." It's a label, like the O-U or the other marks for kosher food. *Hekhsher Tzedek* will ultimately be a certification covering five areas:

- Employee welfare, including fair wages, benefits, health and safety
- Employee training
- Quality control and animal welfare
- Corporate accountability and integrity
- Environmental impact

Hekhsher Tzedek will begin by looking at kosher food – not only meat but I imagine dairy products and cookies and snacks as well, things that all of us eat whether we observe kashrut or not. I will ask the board of directors of our synagogue to join other congregations around the country to resolve that we will support and patronize companies that live up to these standards. Then I will ask you to follow the synagogues' example.

The *Hekhsher Tzedek* is just one symbol. Look for Fair Trade, in chocolate and coffee for instance – you can get Fair Trade coffee from our own King David Coffee Roasters. I read all the time about mutual funds for Moslems that invest according to Islamic principles; while there aren't Jewish funds, there are firms that specialize in investments that are socially responsible along the same dimensions as *Hekhsher Tzedek*. I will post some resources on the web after the holiday.

You might ask – how do we define high enough wages, or environmentally sustainable? We will disagree and argue about where the standard should be, and therefore which companies to buy from and support. I say: If we get to the point where *that* is what we are having our heated debates about in the synagogue, that's a problem I'll take an yday.

When we are consumers, I want to say, we are Jews. Say the words sometimes, *Baruch atah*, and see what happens. Look for ways to bring your buying into the spirit of *Hekhsher Tzedek*.

It's not everything; there is more to life than economics, and more justice to do than just this way. There are things we have to do when we're not at work or at the store, and we have to play the role of citizen, not just consumer. But when we bring the *bracha* consciousness and the *Hekhsher Tzedek* to our economic life, we can inject something powerful into that complex market that connects us with people and places the world over. We can help those firms who are doing right already to grow, and at some point they may become the norm in the marketplace. It's working already in kosher food; it can flow to other places as well.

Spiritual and material are not two separate realms. We are commanded to work six days, and take only one for Shabbat. A Baptist minister once said: "A religion that ain't no good on Monday, ain't no good on Sunday." Though the high holidays mean three days of shul, these days will be most meaningful if, starting tomorrow, we can bring them out into the shuk as well.