

## YOM KIPPUR MORNING 5752

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### **Poverty in America: Keep Looking, Keep Learning**

When a middle class rabbi is invited out to Starbucks, by a poor man who makes a living selling things from two card tables on a street in Harlem -- who should treat?

As the words of the prophet Isaiah we've just heard still ring in our ears, I want to contemplate this question, tell you the story it comes from, and draw out some of the implications for us on a number of levels. From our attitudes, to our individual actions, to our community. I want to say at the outset that this is not the sermon of a liberal or a conservative, but of a student of Torah trying to understand, spiritually, what the words of this Haftarah are telling us today.

This Haftarah from the prophet Isaiah must have been something to hear in person in the streets of Judah, some 2500 years ago. His first words were all hope and ease, about clearing a smooth path for justice. Isaiah paints a picture of a people who are devoted to God's ways, and who fast with great religious fervor. Then, the prophet turns an accusing finger at them. He asks them to compare their great piety with the spirit of fighting and exploitation that they take out into their weekday world, as soon as the fast is over.

But, says the prophet -- it takes very little to become the beacon of God's light. Just a few small actions: to clothe the naked, take in the hungry, release those who are oppressed. Just something that takes only a few short sentences to describe, that's all, says Isaiah. Just do that, and all kinds of blessing will flow through you. As God miraculously split the Sea to free your ancestors, so too you will become for all time workers of miracles.

That's a lot of moves -- from hope and comfort, to accusation, to hope again. I'm sure the prophet understood that it would not be easy.

So back to Harlem. I went to 125th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem, after nightfall, to meet Mustaqeem Abdul-Azeem and interview him. I was writing an article about him for [Project Enterprise](#), a nonprofit that gives microloans and business consultation to low-income people on a path toward self-sufficiency. People who could not qualify for a bank loan. According to Rabbi Moses Maimonides, financing these kinds of loans is the very highest form of tzedakah. Bill Clinton meets Jack Kemp, is the way I often used to put it -- New Democrat meets empowerment conservative.

Mustaqeem told me to meet him at his place of business, at the aforementioned card tables. That's what the business card he handed me said: *Vending Table, 125th and Lenox in front of Starbucks*. You make certain assumptions. Mustaqeem was African-American, and from looking you couldn't tell if he had a home. When I arrived, he was closing up. Though like any good businessman he had people still waiting to buy things even as his official hours were ending. I had to wait nearby, outside, for about fifteen minutes, while he finished with customers and carefully packed and covered his shea butter, lotions and ointments to store for the night.

I intended to buy him a cup of coffee. But by the time we went into Starbucks, I could tell he would refuse. This was his territory, and I was the guest of a businessman.

We had hardly gotten into the conversation when a man came into Starbucks, interrupted our conversation, and asked Mustaqeem to sell him some batteries. "Excuse me a moment," he said to me, and the two of them went outside to the card tables to transact their small business. When he came back in, Mustaqeem said, "There is a store open a couple doors down, and he could buy the same batteries for the same price there. But he wants to buy from *me*."

As we continued to talk, it became pretty clear why someone would go out of his way to buy batteries from the man with the card table, rather than from CVS. Or why a man he once sold something to, who now lives half an hour away in tony Westchester County, once chased him down after hours in a snowstorm to buy something.

Mustaqeem shows me a notebook with a record of all his sales. Each sale has a code: male or female, best guess about age and country of origin -- he can tell who is Caribbean, who is from West Africa, and he is learning who likes to buy what. We're talking about sales of a few dollars at a time. And Mustaqeem has got his other employees trained to take down this same kind of information.

How did Mustaqeem get there? As a kid, while other kids sat around, he collected bottles and cans so he could cash them in for money. His friends were jealous, so he organized them into teams; that was his first business. With his natural talents, he had gotten into real estate and was on the first of owning a used-car dealership. But a messy divorce and time in prison left him with \$100 to his name.

What did he imagine for his future, as I spoke with him that night? Mustaqeem saw himself as a consultant to larger retailers in Harlem, perhaps a wholesaler, and eventually a web-based business for his many foreign customers, who met him on tours that pass through Harlem from Africa, the Caribbean, or Europe. He thought in that event, he'd like to keep the tables at 125<sup>th</sup> and Lenox -- scaled down, as a "marketing tool" on a busy corner, the flagship store for [Mustaqeemssentials.com](http://Mustaqeemssentials.com), doing business around the country and the world.

Does that sound a little outlandish for a poor street vendor, employing people who are even poorer, selling lotions and recordings sales by hand in his notebook? Guess what -- it's what happened. You can go online today and see [mustaqeemssentials.com](http://mustaqeemssentials.com). In 2008, he did over \$100,000 in sales.

I had come to talk with Mustaqeem on my own quest to understand this core Jewish teaching: that giving someone a gift or loan to help them become employed is the highest form of tzedakah. It's easy to understand that as a statement of efficiency: teach me to fish, and I fish for a lifetime. But my teachers about tzedakah had suggested something more: that tzedakah creates a different relationship, a different reality, that eventually blurs the definitions of giver and

receiver. At the end of the conversation at Starbucks, I was exhausted, out of empathy for this hard working, creative, entrepreneurial young man who would be out at this table in Harlem the next day, while I stayed home with my baby. I was appropriately in awe of his talents and his brains.

He had given me a tremendous gift. He challenged my prejudices about the people whom I passed regularly as I drove hurriedly through Harlem over many years. He challenged me to see him as an individual, not as another person trapped in a world defined by lines on a map of New York City. He gave me a reason to take a second look at all kinds of people I might overlook, or jump to conclusions about. He gave me hope that there were at least thousands like him, whose only barrier was access to capital and a network of business contacts. All these were challenges to me -- still are -- even with all my will to see the world through more generous eyes.

I'm telling you this story of Mustaqeem for a number of reasons. One is that it's just a different kind of story about poverty. Different from the ones we know, or think we know: about poverty because of sudden unemployment, or illness, or old age. Each of these stories deserve to be told just as much, though I think we tend to know them better. Another reason is that it's one person's story -- and each story is different, and even surprising. It's so easy to jump to conclusions, to judge another person's suffering.

I'm telling you because it got me thinking about public policy. At a time when we're discussing stimulus ideas that spend tens of thousands to create a job, I recall that Mustaqeem's enterprise initially got off the ground with less than \$5,000 in loans. Not everyone is like him, and I don't say jobs can be created for everyone the same way or as cheaply. Or that everyone who is poor can work. It's just a question we should ask.

I tell this story because of the cup of coffee. I said at the outset that who bought the coffee was an important question. To me, it was a spiritual question. It was the question of looking down on another person, versus letting yourself look up to someone. I can't remember,

honestly, what I did. I do know that after about an hour of conversation, I felt I had to tell him why I was there. Why it was me, middle class rabbi, interviewing him. I tried to explain my quest -- to move from people like me helping people like him -- whites to blacks, rich to poor -- and to let him know that his story was a tremendous gift to me. I was a bit embarrassed, and I'm not sure what he made of it. But sitting there, on his turf, it was for me to be humble and humbled.

There was a lot to be learned in our conversation, and most of the learning was by me -- the "successful" one. I'm more and more convinced this is the key. As long as wealth and poverty live in separation, neighborhood by neighborhood and even in the same part of town; as long as wealth and poverty interact and converse mainly as buyers and sellers, we will continue to throw bad solutions at all kinds of questions of poverty in our society.

We, as a religious community, bring something unique to these discussions. It's not just the money we give voluntarily as tzedakah, or that we agree to pay in taxes for the government to use on our behalf. We know about community. We know about the kinds of connections that I was speaking about last week, the wisdom and connection shared in a setting of equality and mutuality.

That's the idea behind a new initiative in our community called [Circles](#). The Nashua Area Interfaith Council and several of the social service agencies are working on building a new kind of community approach to ending poverty in Greater Nashua. To create the kind of hope that our Haftarah is about this morning.

Circles is a strategy that does involve some of the usual things -- including specific kinds of training for economic success. But it's also an attempt to reorient the community, in the way my interview with Mustaqeem reoriented me. Each low-income person who participates is not viewed as the client, the one "we" are helping -- but the center, the leader of a Circle. Around him or her, is a small group of people called Allies. People from the middle class, drawn from congregations like ours and other area faith communities, I hope.

Over a period of time, the Circles would meet weekly, and the leader would set the agenda -- to get feedback or thoughts or contacts relating to a goal or a plan. And all of these Circles would also meet regularly for dinner, to generate a community among people of all income levels. A community of people who live in Greater Nashua, who know each other, who are simply happy to see each other and put the outer differences aside as irrelevant to our human relationships.

On the one hand, unemployment and poverty, hunger and homeless, these are problems on a massive scale. Even in America, we're talking about millions of people, and the kinds of economic interventions we talk about are in the billions of dollars, hundreds of billions. But when we see it only in that aggregate and that scale, we are tempted back to our stereotypes, and back to recreating all the wedges that divide Mustaqem and me, that divide people who live within miles or blocks of each other. Not to mention, people who live in cities far away or countries across the globe.

And the truth is, those wedges, those veils, are not only about race and class. They are true even within a small community, even within a congregation. During the recession, so many people here -- in the room, or who have stayed away from the shul -- have had financial difficulties. I'm sure some of the *misheberach* names we heard today, also come with worries about paying medical bills.

Financial difficulties come about for all kind of reasons -- becoming unemployed, getting sick, having marriage problems or getting divorced -- and these are isolating experiences. Even friends pull back, for all kinds of reasons. We worry about saying the wrong things -- asking how things are going each time, knowing we'll force a friend to tell again about what's difficult. We worry about not being a good enough friend, not knowing what to say or do to make things better, or to make someone feel better. Or about giving advice and being frustrated if it's not heard. We worry about jealousy, about being embarrassed by good fortune, or wondering why I deserve it and not another person.

Finding the money or good health or a job is part of the answer. But again, there is a spiritual response as well that we need to provide. It sounds trite, but it's true: being aware and present and caring is crucial. Being willing to hear someone else's story on their own terms, in that moment, without rushing to judge.

It's something we have to learn and relearn, over and over. Even in Harlem, I was so intent to meet this particular man and talk to him, that I only said a quick hello to his employee, and let myself assume that the other gentleman, the poor man working for him at the table, was....all the assumptions many of us make about people in rundown neighborhoods. It takes a long time to hear or understand one story, and there are so many others.

We talk about compassion fatigue -- for causes, and even for individuals. We get discouraged by how long: how long a friend is in hard times, how long it takes to see the results of a new antipoverty project, how long until the economy turns around or our politicians get their eye back on the ball. We get overwhelmed by the scale and size.

Isaiah accuses us of taking the easy way out -- talking, beating our breasts, and then going back to business as usual. But if we can act with compassion, and can simply open our eyes, he says, we will be rejuvenated. We will sparkle. We will be glorious.

That's why we have to keep telling stories. About Avraham and Sarah, our shul's namesakes, who took total strangers into their home and fed them. About Mustaqem and thousands like him, whose own energy coupled with microloans and good advice turn their lives around. About the clients and volunteers at the Anne Marie House, where families live and prepare to move from homelessness to independence. About our Jewish Women's Giving Circle, seven women who've met monthly for nearly two years, pooling their own giving and inviting others to learn and support organizations that support mothers and families in need. About our Sisterhood, which picks organizations each year to give donations to. And the stories that can't be told but we know are here. Quiet, or anonymous, or

confidential acts of support and generosity, from one member of our shul to another.

That's why it's important for us to be here for the [CROP Walk](#) in three weeks, Sunday, October 23. CROP stands for Communities Responding to Overcome Poverty. There are some 30 congregations and groups of all faiths that gather for a walk, starting and finishing here at the shul. It's several hundred people. We raise around \$50,000, some of which is distributed locally to agencies that provide food and other services, and some of which goes to the developing world.

The money raised makes a difference. The CROP Walk is also important because we need to encourage each other, to see this place as full as it is today for the sole and express purpose of channeling our compassion. Over the years that Beth Abraham has hosted the start and finish of the CROP Walk, we have been earning a reputation in Greater Nashua -- the reputation of Avraham and Sarah, of hospitality and generosity. Last year, about 120 individual congregants ages maybe 3 to 87 played a role, as walkers or registering people or cooking for the meal afterward. Let's top that this year.

Last year and this year, Beth Abraham has been not only the host but also the organizing committee, a role that rotates among the faith communities. We owe a tremendous thank you to Becky Green, who has been our leader here and on the committee in other years; to Carol Gorelick, who coordinates the walkers; to Lisa Bonneau who heads up the logistics; and to Jane Goodman who organizes our youth participation. Last year and this year, a group of teens from here and some of the churches have been going around teaching religious school students through skits and discussions -- they are led by our own Rosie Hegfield, grade 9.

We have all kinds of resources within the shul that make a difference. In this time of great unemployment, your personal network is a resource for someone else, because more jobs come from personal connections than from sending a resume cold. The \$1 that people put

in the tzedakah box in the Chapel at evening minyan, believe it or not, makes a difference. That's money that adds up, and it actually goes to feed people and to help pay medical bills.

And with the presidential primary and state and national elections coming up, we should be holding some feet to the fire. In both parties. We need a better sense of how the candidates really see the world, what kind of assumptions they make, what kind of giving and volunteering do they themselves do. More on that as the fall goes on.

There are all kinds of things we do for people in need. All these practical things...but also what it starts with, which is the open eye, the open ear, and the open heart. The vision of a community that is made whole because we respond to needs. The model is God, who at the beginning of this morning's prophecy says: I dwell on high, *Shochayn Ad Marom*, but where I am is with those who are most down in spirit. We recite those words in our prayers every Shabbat morning -- remember what they mean each time you say them.

Those words are the secret, and have always been. The prophet reminds us of the first step, which is the hardest but most profound. *U-mib'sarcha lo titalaym*: Not to lift our eyes away. Not to disappear in the face of need. God is most fully God when God is with those who are low. Let us, too, try to be God-like, in a community and a world that is still full of need.