

ENOUGH

(Eizehu Ashir?)

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5773

The chairs were set up. The volunteers – 320 of them – were perfectly coordinated. Hillel had taken his last sip of Pepsi as the sun prepared to set. The davening team – assembled. The people - standing. With pomp befitting only one of the holiest moments of the holiest day of the year, we dramatically opened the ark – to discover that it was empty. Not a single Torah in sight. And so it goes – for years we have talked about/ laughed about/ fretted about the Forgotten Torah on Kol Nidre. And each time it comes up, I wonder the same thing: what about everything that went right that night? After yontif I looked at the project plan for Kol Nidre – there were 716 items on it. But it's the Empty Ark and the Forgotten Torah we remember!

What is it about human beings that we are so attuned to what is missing in an otherwise nearly perfect picture? We're so aware of what we don't have. The ways in which our dreams have not been realized and our desires not yet fulfilled.

I want to start our High Holy Day season this year – in the midst of all of the upheaval and uncertainty in the world, especially after the past couple of weeks - by looking inside, to one of the more bizarre and yet totally predictable aspects of our psyche and our culture: No matter what we do/ how much we have, we can't seem to shake the feeling that we are not enough.

Not smart enough.

Young

Beautiful

Rich

Accomplished

Thin

Not Enough

FRIENDS

LOVE

RECOGNITION

SEX

TIME

And no amount of evidence will convince us to the contrary. For all of our privilege, success, opportunity, we live in a culture of scarcity that leaves us with laser focus on what we don't have. Either we haven't yet found the partner or calling or career we thought we'd have by now – or we have it all but we don't have enough TIME to get done what everyone expects of us.

Here's the thing: it's not just you. There is a spiritual anorexia embedded in American culture – and over the past years it has become not only widespread but in some ways *definitional*. Stanford Professor Dr. James R. Doty writes: "Why, in a country that consumes 25% of the world's resources (the U.S.), is there

an epidemic of loneliness, depression, and anxiety? Why do so many in the West who have all of their basic needs met still feel impoverished?" 06/07/2012 (The Huffington Post)

Or, in the immortal words of Louie CK: *Everything's amazing and nobody's happy.*

For all of the magnificence of the world – all of the beauty and richness and preciousness of our lives, we spend a hell of a lot of time talking about how slow the internet is.

This didn't come from nowhere. I wonder if it is somehow embedded in our DNA. Think of the Israelites, newly free from oppression, hard labor, daily humiliation - finally able to think and speak and live as human beings with dignity, in constant, day to day contact with the Holy One. But they spend MOST of their time KVETCHING. Complaining about what they don't have. Not enough water, food not good enough. No meat, like there was in Egypt. No quail, no crème brulee. A thankless generation— blind to the utter miracle of their survival, aware only of what they lack.

In *Pirkei Avot*, Ben Zoma asks four questions that on the surface seem simple, but are penetrating in their implications and will be our guide through the holy days this year. One: *Eizehu ashir?* Who is rich? And his answer might surprise you. It's not the guy with the private jet. Not Abraham, who was wealthy in cattle, silver and gold (Gen. 13:2). Not even King David, who had enough to donate 100,000 talents of gold and 1m talents of silver to the building of the Beit HaMikdash (I Chronicles 29:3) – estimated to be billions of dollars in today's terms.

Who is rich, Ben Zoma asks? *Hasameah b'helko* - one who finds happiness in what he has.

The rich person is not the one who has everything – but the one who can find happiness even though he's not where he imagined he'd be turning 40.

Even though all of her friends from grad school seem to have films in Sundance while she waits for a callback from an agent.

Even though he's somehow the only one who's still single.

Even though -

A couple of years ago I heard the story of a young Israeli soldier who came face to face with a bomber in Nablus. His general saw that one of his men was endangered and ran between the two, only to be killed when the bomb detonated. The soldier survived, but was paralyzed. He woke up in hospital and the first question he asked the attending nurses: Will I be able to have sex?" "Yes," they answered. One year later, he went down aisle in a wheelchair at his wedding. When it was time to break the glass at the end of the ceremony, he lifted up a limp leg and crushed the glass beneath him.

Think about what it would take to truly be *sameah b'helko* – to recognize that what we have is not everything, but it's pretty damn good. Good enough to make a life out of, even.

What Ben Zoma realizes is that ENOUGH is actually a moving target, because there is no objective point of satisfaction. Whatever we have, we're hungry for MORE:

1. All I want is to get the job. A foot in the door.
2. I've been here for three years already – it's going nowhere. I feel invisible.

3. OK, I'm partner now – or director – or manager. Or managing director partner. But all I want is more time with my kids – I can't believe I'm missing their whole childhood for this stupid job.

In the language of the Rabbis: One who has *one* hundred wants *two* hundred; one who has *two* hundred wants *four* hundred (Kohelet Rabbah 1:13). The desperate quest for more is not only a fool's mission, but ultimately jeopardizes everything we do have and leaves us destined for a life of disappointment and regret. The scarcity ethos is destructive – and we know it. That's part of the reason we show up here this week – to catch our breath. To try to recalibrate. To find some balance and perspective again.

So Ben Zoma challenges us not to paper over our longings, but to cultivate a heart that is awake to the blessings even when confronted with gaping voids. Don't wait until you're rich to be grateful for what you have. Even then you'll find something lacking.

I don't know how Ben Zoma had the wisdom to realize this, but we are given a hint in the Talmud. He was once in the middle of a meal when he had a startling moment of awakening, realizing that for a man to eat, someone had to plow, sow, reap, bind – whereas "I just get to eat a piece of bread" (Berakhot 58a). Once conscious of it all, you can't help but be content with the slice of bread in your hand. Consider what had to happen for us to be here today. Who stayed up all night transforming this old gym into a sacred space? Who cooked the dinner you'll eat tonight? How were your shoes made – who designed the mold and cut the pattern and attached the sole, who polished them and boxed them and stocked them in the store? Make 100 blessings a day, Rabbi Meir says: awaken your heart to find blessing even in the most mundane elements of life (Menahot 43b). Gratitude is a Jewish spiritual practice – one that works to reorient us from a mindset of not enough – to a wakeful recognition of blessing. Try this experiment next time you're feeling frustrated, next time you feel weighed down by scarcity: choose *one thing* in your life that you do have, whether it's your ability to walk or a friend who cares or a good book or a great pair of jeans. And trace it back 10 steps. What had to go right for you to have that blessing in that moment? This practice will begin to shape a spiritual resilience that will help you shift from a mindset of scarcity to abundance.

It's *Dayenu* – from Seder. Had God split the Sea but not led us through to dry land – *dayenu*, we say – it would have been enough! But would that have been enough? Of course not – we would have drowned in the Sea. Had God given us the Torah but not brought us to the Land of Israel, *dayenu*! But again, we know that it would not really have been sufficient – we would have died in the desert. So what does it mean to say "ENOUGH!" when really, it's nowhere near enough? *Dayenu* is seen by our tradition as a *tikkun* – our response to the complaining of the Israelites in the desert, who – fresh from slavery – had completely internalized a mindset of scarcity. In contrast, we, as free people, are able to express gratitude even when we know that what we have is not close to everything we need.

This alone is a mighty spiritual challenge – one that certainly cuts against the grain of our culture and perhaps even our human nature.

And yet, contentment with what we have – sense of enoughness – is simply not enough.

Toni Morrison said a few years ago: I have often wished that Jefferson had not used that phrase "the pursuit of happiness" as the third right... I would rather he had written "life, liberty and the pursuit of

meaningfulness” or “integrity” or “truth...” Don’t settle for happiness. It’s not good enough. Personal success devoid of meaningfulness, free of a steady commitment to social justice, that’s more than a barren life; it is a trivial one. *It’s looking good instead of doing good* (Commencement address, Rutgers University, 2010).

What would it mean to simply sit in our happiness when violence has again erupted throughout the Middle East?

When injustice rolls down like water, and hatred and bigotry flow like a mighty stream?

When millions of Americans put their children to bed at night hungry –

Or live in fear of deportation.

Or wonder if they’ll be allowed to vote this year, given new polling restrictions.

Or speculate as to when they’ll see their next paycheck.

Or wonder if they and their partner will ever have the right to be married, in dignity, and in accordance with the law.

Personal contentment in the face of all that is missing, all that is broken in our world seems to be the worst kind of spiritual misalignment. Happiness is great, but it’s not enough - because *the line between contentment and complacency is dangerously thin and deceptively hazy.*

I’ll tell you how I learned this. I really used to believe the myth – promulgated and perpetuated in nearly every campaign speech - that in America anyone can be anything if you work hard and play by the rules. When I was in college, I started working with children suffering from poverty, abuse and neglect who lived in the projects surrounding the university. I became very close with one little girl, in particular, and would take her out every week. We’d go for long walks and read together and talk about her dreams of becoming a doctor. I loved her desire to learn, her curiosity about science and nature, her ridiculous sense of humor. I adored her and continued to work with her through college and rabbinical school. One day, when she was about 14, we were out for a walk and it began to pour, so we ran for cover in the tiny brownstone apartment David and I rented on the Upper West Side, not too far from where she lived. It was the first time she had been in my apartment, and I watched her silently take-in the bookshelves, the kitchen, the rundown old couch. And I remember seeing tears well up in her eyes as she caught a glimpse of my desk in the corner – covered in books and papers and half drunk cups of coffee. “It’s all a lie,” she finally said. “What do you mean?” I asked. “There’s no way I’ll become a doctor. I’m lucky if I see 30.” “You’re wrong,” I said. “You just have to be fierce. You have to believe in yourself and be dedicated to your dreams. You have to make good choices and find great teachers and work really, really hard. I know you can do it!” “You don’t understand!” she shouted at me. “I’ll never have a desk lamp!”

I looked over at my desk lamp - \$17.99 from Bed and Bath. \$17.99 will stand in the way of you realizing your dreams? That’s absurd, I thought. But I found myself haunted by her comment. And over the next many sleepless nights, I began to realize that I was immensely and extraordinarily thankful for my desk lamp. Without it, I couldn’t sit up half the night reading great books and studying Talmud and stretching my heart and mind. I had never thought of it before, really – how important a good desk lamp is for a grad student. But I simultaneously felt absolutely and inexorably devastated by my desk lamp – in particular by the fact that I had one and this kid I cared so deeply for did not. The desk lamp was for her

the symbol of *everything* I had that she lacked: the private bedroom growing up, the parents who cared if I did my homework or not, the healthy food, the brand new school supplies each year, the SAT tutors, the dedicated teachers, the summer enrichment programs, and yes – the desk lamp. In that moment I understood: gratitude is not only an awareness of what *you* have, but what others do not. It does not just leave us with a sense of fullness, but also with a sense of emptiness. Not just with satisfaction, but with *hunger*.

Here's how Rav Kook put it: "In order to lead human beings on the path of continual improvement, God implanted within the human soul the incessant drive to always seek more..." (Rav Kook, *Ein Eyah* vol. I, pp. 140-141)

In other words, our instinctive "never enough" attitude – our dissatisfaction – can be a prerequisite to spiritual, emotional and intellectual growth, and is indispensable in building a just and compassionate society.

The Jewish people lived in exile for 2000 years, and only survived all these years – truly against all odds – because we did *not* accept it.

We never accepted our oppression or persecution.

We never stopped dreaming about and praying for and singing about home.

This yearning has been a source of strength - which has allowed our people to survive even the darkest night. "We may fall," says Netivot Shalom, "but as long as we *do not make peace with it* we maintain the power to return, eventually, to our true stature" (Netivot Shalom, Parashat Vayeshev).

Longing. Yearning. Striving – all of these are essential, from a spiritual standpoint, to becoming.

And so we are faced with a very complex spiritual challenge. On one hand, to have what we have and only long for more is to be an ingrate. And on the other, to have what we have and not feel responsible for those who don't share that privilege is to be morally and spiritually corrupt.

Our goal is nothing less than to achieve, simultaneously – a deep and profound gratitude for what we have (*sameah b'helko*) - and also a wakeful recognition of what is not yet (*od lo*).

As Jews, we are called to be both.

These two drives may seem to be in conflict, but they actually live in dynamic tension. The tension between them enlivens us, gives us a sense purpose, and adds meaning to our lives.

My blessing for these ten holy days we have together: we walk away with a renewed commitment to gratitude with an attitude:

You are enough.

And yet enough is not nearly enough.

Now let's get back to work.

And on our side, we'll make sure the Torah is in the ark for Kol Nidre.

Shana Tova.