

Rosh Hashanah Morning, 1 Tishri 5770 – Time for a Reset  
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Friends: Do I have a list for you. Not the grocery list, not a honey-do list, not a punch list for the Tross Family education center, not even a Letterman style top ten list. My list, taken from a survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, features the headlines of some of the seven most widely read news reports since last Rosh Hashanah (not including articles about Michael Jackson). And here they are:

7. Rising unemployment
6. Debate over auto bailout
5. Wall Street financial crisis hits
4. Falling price of gas and oil
3. Major drops in U.S. stock market
2. 2008 pres. general election
1. Debate over Wall St. bailout

(<http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/479.pdf>)

Of course, at all but one of these concerned the economy with the presidential election providing the sole distraction. And for the most part, none of the six stories about the economy conveyed any good news. If you needed documentation, now you have it. 5769, the year just ended, has been most difficult..

Need more evidence about what has affected people this year? An organization called the Global Language Monitor has determined that number one among the Top Ten (new) Phrases of 2008 was the term, “Financial Tsunami.” This metaphor for the “Worldwide financial ...” melt down has such power when you recall the unspeakably tragic and destructive 2004 Thailand tsunami. It wiped out and washed away everything in its path. (<http://www.languagemonitor.com/news/top-words-of-year031>) The phrase communicates quite a feeling about the tone of 5769.

More often than not, commentators, editorial writers, politicians, statespersons, and just plain folks have used the word crisis to describe the economic situation since last Rosh Hashanah. 5769 brought the credit crisis, the mortgage crisis, the stock market crisis, the unemployment crisis, the auto industry crisis – all of which resulted in a period of pervasive worry; a year of fear and uncertainty.

You really cannot overstate the ongoing impact of this economic crisis. The events of the year required and still call for resilience, careful thinking, and difficult choices. They have affected each of us differently and more or less severely. Some have asked for help for the very first time. Others have suffered in silence. Still others have worried into the wee hours of the morning – wondering, speculating, awaiting the next day’s bad news. I suspect that most of us have made serious economic decisions and taken some pragmatic steps and made adjustments we had not contemplated. I assume that for many, faith in a system that once seemed to work well has been shaken to its very roots.

I will leave to economic policy makers and pundits any commentary about short term questions like: Has the recession ended and the economic crisis begun to abate? Has the housing market picked up a little and have more jobs become available? Did the clunkers really bring in the cash and has credit become more obtainable? How long will this difficult recovery take? Their prognostications about things you and I really cannot

control will have much to do with how we shall move forward in the most pragmatic ways; how we'll get the bills paid and the budgets balanced.

But a second kind of very public crisis makes matters more complex. This is a crisis in morality and trust that has shaken America as a whole and many in the Jewish community, in particular. One might utter the name, Madoff, and you'll get the picture. Or one might mention the five rabbis and the civic officials in New Jersey accused of money laundering, or recall philandering elected officials and you'll get the idea. Think greed, duplicity, infidelity, gross dishonesty, ...all characterizing extremely highly placed persons, who, once upon a time, enjoyed the public trust – but with their positions compromised systems in which so many believed. (And I might add cynically – they were just the ones who got caught. And one might wonder, perhaps even more cynically, if these were the newsworthy, what about what may have occurred in private, between persons who would never merit mention on the evening news or the internet blogs.)

And it seems to me that the overwhelming greed and dishonesty manifest in these crises of trust exacerbates the multi faceted economic crisis that set the tone for the year. - - too much avarice, too much greed, too much arrogance leads to a more generalized sense of distrust. After all, any lasting fix will require transparency and trustworthiness. Yes, the word crisis applies when thinking about these aspects of 5769.

Now, though, we are in day 1 of 5770 and, while we may not be able, personally, to ameliorate immediately the financial crisis, the onset of the new year presents an opportunity to set the tone for the days to come. As Rahm Emanuel put it several months ago when responding to reporters' questions about government bail outs of the auto industry: "Rule one: Never allow a crisis to go to waste. They are opportunities to do big things." While he meant, "...turning the auto industry's crisis into a chance to enact changes concerning energy conservation and environmental benefits and other things..." (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/10/us/politics/10obama.html>). This idea can have has a much broader application.

This crisis will be a waste if we stop with the pragmatic and quantifiable fixes like the bailouts and the exhausting personal belt tightening – the measures that deal with symptoms of the crisis. It will **not** if we also focus on what it takes to endure such crises – no matter how lengthy the recovery - so that we move into 5770 with a sharpened perspective on what really does matter; on an accounting of the riches truly beyond measure that we can gather to ourselves.

It will be a waste if we figure that the sinful public figures will pay and not concern ourselves further. It will **not** if we raise up the fundamental ethical issues their improprieties brought to the surface and speak out about how a truly healthy society is built on those very ethics and values.

So, what do Jews do when matters that affect us, powerfully and painfully, are beyond our control? What do Jews do about crises? Al Vorspan once entitled a book about Jewish life in America: *Start Worrying: Details to Follow*. I think most of us have that down pat. After the worrying and after the hard work and belt tightening and the condemnation of the Madoff's of this world, we have more to accomplish. And that is not only how to calculate how much money we made or lost, nor how egregiously and outrageously certain now public figures acted. Rather it is the simple sounding, but ever so challenging matter of who we are and how we respond - even in the most taxing times.

For that, listen carefully again to the symbolic language from the prayer of a few minutes ago – it knows about crises: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed: who will live and who will die, who by fire, who by water, who by hunger, who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague...”, and so on. Leave aside why such things happen – that is beyond our ken. But we do know that they occur. And, in every case, they are way beyond our control, much as things seemed this year. And they are real crises. But, somehow, we carry on – sometimes weakened for a while, sometimes shaken up. No matter what we plan, life’s journey may take us “From defeat to defeat to defeat – until looking backward, or ahead, we see that victory lies not at some high place along the way, but in having made the journey, stage by stage, ....” (*Gates Of Repentance*, 283)

The climax of the *unentaneh tokef* prayer shows the way to carry on – even when the journey includes that occasional defeat or crisis: *u'teshuvah, ut'filah, utzedakkah maavirin et roa ha'g'zeirah*, but repentance, prayer, and tzedakkah not only avert the severe decree. But, if I read the Hebrew right, the word *maavirin* means that they enable us to pass through it and even transcend it. How? With repentance – a return to the basics of human ethical behavior; with prayer – honest contemplation and reaching to God – a pause to reflect, to regroup, reconsider, reconnect; with *tzedakkah* – meaningful acts of justice and fairness. The prayer says that these three elements empower us to survive, and even to thrive beyond the crisis. These aspects of life we can control affect the enduring quality of our lives, individually and communally; and ultimately they define us in the most lasting way.

So start today with *teshuvah*. But I want to think of it not only as repentance from sin, but also as what the journalist Kurt Anderson calls a “Reset.” When we reset .....,” Anderson writes in the book of the same name, “we can rediscover common sense and the better angels of our nature. We possess the ability to rejigger and renovate our lives and our country as necessary...” (*Reset*, Kurt Anderson, Random House, 2009)

A reset: Have you ever reset the Palm Pilot, the Blackberry, the I-phone, or the computer? A reset can be terrifying. You do it when the darn thing is frozen or just not working right or a consultation with call center in Mumbai didn't help. You do it when everything is messed up – and no tinkering will rectify it. Reset is the perilous moment of truth when you push that tiny button or stick a pin in that tiny hold on the back of the PDA and the screen goes blank and the thing closes down for what seems an eternity. Or at least long enough for you to wonder: Will all of my appointments, phone numbers, and emails disappear into some digital never-never land? When it cuts off, are you cut off? All the electronic pillars that support your life momentarily vanish when you reset and you really do not know what will be left when or if the screen lights up again. But, different from a do-over, or even a mulligan, a reset affords a chance to move forward with all of the parts that had been there all of the time - but this time, unfrozen and working just like new. It is more than a second chance. It is a whole new day.

This crisis calls for a reset - a chance, as Anderson put it, to “... rediscover common sense and the better angels of our nature.” We need to reset when greed, immorality, and avarice have turned life upside down. We can reset to reaffirm and restore to primacy the priorities and values that can define us no matter what Ben Bernanke most recently said about the recession because they are recession-proof.. Such a reset will serve a dual purpose. One: it will fortify and stabilize us as we move through turbulent times. And two: it will transform the tone of our time as the new year unfolds.

Reset the first time and the sage Hillel himself comes up on the darkened screen. He will remind us that how we relate to others matters most of all. And it is not just others, but also, in our day, “the other.” Listen to the famous Talmudic story as if it were the first time. “...a certain heathen (the ultimate other) came before Shammai and said to him, “convert me to Judaism, on condition that you teach me the whole torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai chased him away with the builder’s ruler he had in his hand.(what a way to respond to another). When the same heathen went to Hillel with the same request, Hillel responded ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole torah, while the rest is the commentary; go and learn it.’” (Shabbat 31 a)

Hillel’s quick answer sounds simple, yet his essential rule is often lost in the tumultuous contemporary give and take - (remember the screaming dialogues and the lack of listening at so many of this summer’s congressional town meetings, or the heckling at a presidential address before a joint session of congress?) What holds for me, Hillel says to the heathen, holds for you. What harms me, also harms you. And not only that, what works for you and for me, works for a third person, and a fourth and a fifth. Put Hillel’s words in the positive: know not only what is hateful to you, but also what you want for yourself. And then pay it forward, so to speak, to another. Make it available to spouses, to children, to neighbors, to business associates and clients, to doctors and patients, to students and teachers..... Do you want respect, a listening ear, a second chance, an open mind, an open heart, an opportunity? Reset and follow Hillel’s teaching.

Now reset a second time: This time the writing is on the wall –directly behind me. *Higid lcha adam, mah tov...*It is has been told you what is good and what God requires of you . Some may have heard about the good; the justice, mercy and humility, but it appears that other folks out there missed the memo. The year’s crises reveal as much. Reset: even as we would see the others as we see ourselves, the next step is knowing what is the good and being compelled by that knowledge.

The rabbis concretize such abstractions as doing the good by telling a story. So, they recall Shimon ben Shetach, a poor sage who traded in cotton which he schlepped from place to place on his back. One day, his disciples said to him, ‘Master, allow us to buy you a donkey so that you will not have to labor so much! No more schlepping for you.’ They went and bought him a donkey from a certain non-Israelite and found upon it a precious stone. They came and told him ‘Now you need not labor ever again.’ Said he, “why so?” They replied, “we bought you a donkey from a certain non-Jew, and found upon it a precious stone.” He asked, “Does he know of it? They replied: “No,” he told them, “Go and return it.”

The story explains that while it might have been legally permissible to appropriate the lost property of a non-Israelite and, therefore, keep the precious stone (and gain from it financially), Shimon ben Shetach still insisted on returning it.(JT Bab MEtzia 8)

Why? He simply wanted to do what his heart, his conscience, his experience all said was good and right. And, not only that, he did good to the ultimate “other.”

A teacher of mine suggested that a purpose of religion is to remind us of what is good (for this sample the top ten on the other wall): honoring parents, pursuing justice, feeding the hungry, acting with honesty. Actions reveal goodness. Take a moment to consider what purely good thing have you done - -one for which there is no reward nor benefit for you other than the knowledge you have done the right and good thing. Person by person, the practice of goodness will help us through the time of crisis – because it

will influence the tone of the time. Even the worst recession can be a bit more bearable when people act with goodness and kindness toward one another. Reset: give primacy to Micah's admonition: simply put, do good. .

Now reset one last time. This will surely re-jigger how think about what it means to be fully human and a member of a community as small as a family and as large as global civilization. A straightforward Torah text points the way: "If you see your fellow's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your fellow. If your fellow does not live near you or you do not know who he is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your fellow claims it. Then you shall give it back to him....Then the simple paragraph about lost items concludes with a bang: *lo tuchal l'hitaleim*, You may not remain indifferent." (Deut 22:1-3)

You have to care about something as usual as a lost item, and something as substantial as the dignity of another in a time of hardship.

We cannot let the crises beat us into giving up or looking the other way or drawing the figurative wagons into a circle – even if we are exhausted from it all. Reset: *Lo tuchal l'hitaleim*, You may not remain indifferent." (Deut 22:3)

What does that mean for us? In a speech twenty years ago at Depauw University, Elie Weisel said: "There is nothing worse in life than indifference. Indifference to evil is evil and at times worse than evil..." "The opposite of love is not hate but indifference. The opposite of knowledge is not ignorance but indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness but indifference...."

"In a moral society the first lesson is also the last—you must fight indifference. (Elie Wiesel, "Building a Moral Society", 'Timothy and Sharon Ubben Lecture' DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana, 21 September 1989.

<http://storiesforspeakers.blogspot.com/2008/03/elie-wiesel-on-indifference.html>)

In a moral society the first lesson is also the last—you must fight indifference about poverty, hunger, incivility, intolerance, prejudice, racism, sexism, age-ism, greed, infidelity, dishonesty... Reset three: You may not remain indifferent. " Deut 22:1-3)

So let's reset this Rosh Hashanah and do the *teshuvah*, the repentance that will influence 5770. It will empower us to pass through crises and set the tone of our time, and bring a reassuring sense of God's presence into our challenging time. That reset starts with each of us – in the most intimate circles of our lives.

Friends: I have a list for you, a list of real fundamentals. Here are the first three:

1. What is hateful to you, do not do to others
2. Seek to do what you know to be good.
3. You may not remain indifferent ...

May living by them, with actions louder than words, make 5770 the year of the human to human, person to person anti-crisis – a year of life and peace, joy and exaltation, redemption and comfort.

Amen