

## Rosh Hashanah 5773: Priceless

Gut yun tov. Once again, as summer begins its transition into fall, we reflect on what we did well, on what we could have done differently, on loss and redemption. I am speaking, of course, of baseball. So here is a baseball story, from a recent “Ethicist” column in the New York Times. A reader wrote:

At a baseball game in San Francisco, my friend Fritz managed to catch a foul ball. A kid sitting a few rows behind my friend was also among those scrambling for the ball. Urged on by 50 surrounding fans, my friend gave the ball to the kid. The fans cheered. Not two minutes later, a rival fan showed up and offered the kid \$100 for the ball. With his parents’ encouragement, the kid exchanged the ball for the cash.

You may laugh, but the fellow who gave the ball to the kid was outraged, and the letter-writer wanted to know: Should the kid have split the profits with the man who gave him the ball? Was it even ethical for the kid to have sold the ball at all? In other words, was this about an object—a baseball—with monetary value, or was this about a shared love of baseball, an exciting and shared “fan moment” —and can you, or should you, really put a price on that?

But as we gather here together in the synagogue, we know that this time is not only the end of the regular baseball season. It’s also... election season. And as with the baseball question, we might ask here, as well, what is the appropriate role of commerce?

Early in the summer, front page election coverage focused not on candidates’ ideas and intentions, but on how much money each of their super PACs had raised. One could easily have concluded that money, not policy, would be the deciding point of the election—as if we were in the middle of a financial contest rather than a political one.

“There are some things money can’t buy,” says Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel, “but these days, not many.” In a persuasive recent essay in the Atlantic, “What Money Can’t Buy,” Professor Sandel argues that market thinking—seeing not just material goods but social goods as items up for sale—has come to permeate every aspect of our lives. He points to examples including aspects of health, education, public safety, national security, criminal justice, and environmental protection as social goods that we currently buy and sell as if they were commodities.

This morning—not only baseball season, not only campaign season, but also Rosh Hashanah—I want to examine with you this moment we live in—the effect of the commodification of even the most intimate aspects of our lives, and how it profoundly affects our understanding of our selves and community. How is our sense of “the good life,” even of the sacred, shaped by a world in which nearly everything is for sale? And how can our Judaism help us to embrace and reaffirm our intrinsic knowledge that there are values that do not have a price tag?

So: What can be bought and sold these days? Here are a few items, courtesy of Professor Sandel: prison cell upgrades in Santa Ana, CA for \$90 a night. Access to the car pool lane while driving solo in several U.S. cities will cost you \$8; the right to emit a metric ton of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in the European Union? \$10.50. You can buy someone's forehead to display a permanent tattoo with commercial advertising for \$10,000, or the services of a surrogate mother in India for \$8,000. A soldier-for-hire to fight in Somalia or Afghanistan sets taxpayers back up to \$1,000 a day.

If none of these sound unusual to you—if you'd say they're "just the market at work," trust me when I tell you that not too long ago, the availability of most of these would have seemed appalling, inappropriate, or like a violation of social norms to many people. How did we get here? Sandel argues that it wasn't by deliberate, considered choice. Rather, it sort of happened to us. In the final years of the Cold War, political leaders celebrated markets as the keys to prosperity and freedom – and, says Sandel, "Understandably so. No other mechanism for organizing the production and distribution of goods had proved as successful at generating affluence and prosperity." Market triumphalism held sway until the financial meltdown of 2008. During the three-decade period in between, Sandel writes,

... even as growing numbers of countries around the world embraced market mechanisms in the operation of their economies, something else was happening. Market values were coming to play a greater and greater role in social life. Economics was becoming an imperial domain.

According to Professor Sandel, a natural result of the extended celebration and global expansion of market economies has been the corrosive assumption that nearly every area of life can be run according to market rules: a transformation from market economics to the "market society." Among his examples: for-profit schools, hospitals, and prisons; the direct marketing of prescription pharmaceuticals to consumers; sale of "naming rights" to parks and civic spaces; commercial advertising in public schools from buses to cafeteria corridors; the outsourcing of war to private military contractors; and, Sandel says, "a system of campaign finance in the U.S. that comes close to permitting the buying and selling of elections."

That's the civic and institutional side. There is another, very personal side as well—what sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild and others have referred to as "the outsourced life." That is, the ability, and sometimes the need, to pay others to do for us what many people used to be able to do for themselves, or to depend upon family and friends for: personal chefs, aging parent tenders, dating coaches, hired grave visitors, children's birthday party planners, rent-a-grandmother, rent-a-dad, rent-a-friend.

All of these are available; and, as Hochschild explains, we're caught in a self-perpetuating cycle that makes them seem increasingly necessary:

The more anxious, isolated and time-deprived we are, the more likely we are to turn to paid personal services. To finance these extra services, we work longer hours. This leaves less time to spend with family, friends and neighbors; we become less likely to call on them for help, and they on us. And the more we rely on the market, the more hooked we become on its promise....

In a world that undermines community, disparages government and marginalizes nonprofit organizations as ways of meeting growing needs of working families, these [personal services] are likely to proliferate. As will the corresponding cultural belief in the superiority of what's for sale.

Along with increasing isolation and anxiety, magnifying disparities between those who can afford top-tier personal services and everyone else, and reducing the time we have to spend with those we care about, the market society also brings with it a destructive transformation in our worldview. Sandel presents the idea succinctly: "... markets don't only allocate goods; they express and promote certain attitudes toward the goods being exchanged." In other words, market thinking changes our essential values. Sandel goes on:

When we decide that certain goods may be bought and sold, we decide, at least implicitly, that it is appropriate to treat them as commodities, as instruments of profit and use. But not all goods are properly valued in this way. The most obvious example is human beings. Slavery was appalling because it treated human beings as a commodity, to be bought and sold at auction. Such treatment fails to value human beings as persons, worthy of dignity and respect....

We are sickened by news stories about black markets in children in other countries because we know reflexively that human beings should not be bought and sold, treated as objects for "profit and use." What does it do to our sense of ourselves as responsible citizens in a democracy if we outsource our soldiering, if we find our political voices drowned in a competition of who-can-buy-more-advertising? And how does it change our view of ourselves as parents, as family members, as friends, if we pay others to take on the substance of those roles for us?

It should come as no surprise that the pervasive shift in values brought about by market thinking affects our religious lives as well.

In my role as Rabbi, I speak with many people, seeking to understand their struggles and their joys, and how living Jewishly can help bring meaning and comfort to their lives. When I ask people about their lives, the answer often includes some variation on the theme of busy: crazed, stressed, overwhelmed by the demands of work and family obligations. People consistently talk about their need for community: a sense of belonging, of place, of purpose.

They seek both support for themselves and assurance that their life matters, that they can make a difference in other people's lives and the world.

People speak with me, too, about desiring connection to the sacred: to God, to meaning and history, and action that both informs and transcends their daily challenges and concerns. Some would like to be able to pass a sense of the sacred and Jewish identity on to their children; some simply wish to claim or reclaim it for themselves. And these things are possible; but finding and achieving them will take a different mindset than the one that many of us have become accustomed to.

Susan Shevitz, former director of Brandeis University's Hornstein Program in Jewish Professional Leadership, noted in a recent article that we have grown used to tailoring our computers and televisions to meet our needs, and so it should be no surprise that we would seek to do the same with our religious experiences.

As the scholar Chava Weissler notes, "Like other Americans, Jews live in a commodity culture, in which consumption is the main means of self-expression." We mix and match—in Weissler's words, "putting together assorted and appealing bits of Judaism."

But computers and televisions are objects that we can purchase and acquire. Identity and meaning require a different approach.

Among us today, as always during the High Holidays, are guests experiencing our Kehillah for the first time or perhaps considering deepening involvement with the Kehillah. Welcome! I met with many of you during the summer, and, not infrequently, we jokingly used the phrase "shul shopping" to describe your search for a community that fits, feels like home, offers you opportunities to learn and participate and share and grow, that adds meaning, joy, sanctity and fulfillment to your lives. But if our culture starts to take the idea of "shul shopping" too literally – if we come to believe that community and connection are just two more concrete things that we can buy and own—then we are setting ourselves up for profound disappointment and isolation. We cannot find those intangibles as consumers in the marketplace.

Judaism offers us a radical, and radically different version of ourselves, and of our purpose in the world.

In a market society, each of us is trained to ask, "What do I want, what is the dollar value, and how do I get it?" Now, Judaism doesn't disparage the satisfaction of material needs; our liturgy includes daily prayers for abundance in all its forms: bountiful crops, success in business, an honorable livelihood. But these are not meant to be an end in themselves. They are meant to create the conditions for leading a life of holiness.

The questions that define us as Jews are not about what each of us can possess and consume, but "How do we contribute as partners with God in creation? How do we respond

to the call to be holy? How can we embody our ideas about, or our faith in, an ethical, just and compassionate God through our deeds?”

In *To Heal a Fractured World*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that as Jews we find meaning and purpose in relationship to one another:

We have become lonely selves in search of purely personal fulfillment. But that surely must be wrong. Life alone is only half a life. One spent pursuing the satisfaction of desire is less than satisfying and never all we desire....

Judaism contains mysteries, but its ultimate purpose is not mysterious at all. It is to honor the image of God in other people and thus turn the world into a home for the divine presence.

Rabbi Harold Schulweiss drives this point home quite succinctly. You are all probably familiar with the phrase “l’chayyim.” As Rabbi Schulweiss points out, this is actually a plural verb. When we rejoice, it isn’t to the singular l’chai – to life – it is to lives. Because Jewish life is lived in the context of community.

Our souls are nourished not by what we can acquire, but by what we can give, how we can participate, what we can create together. This is no abstraction; it is happening right now. Take a moment and look around you. This worship service, the observance of Rosh Hashanah—only happens because we, all of us, are here, praying and singing together. The chairs you’re sitting on, and the *machzorim*—the High Holy Day prayer books—you’re holding exist because the community came together to make them happen. Our synagogue is a place where we gather for learning and meaning, ethics and spiritual growth. It only has a purpose if people come, as you have come, to participate. At the same time, the synagogue can only exist if its functional needs—staff, building maintenance, books and other materials—are met.

A generation or two ago, synagogues assumed—because individual Jews assumed—that when you settled into a community, you joined the synagogue. Institutional support was the default. Today, though, synagogues must inform, promote, advertise what they excel at and what they can offer. Our Kehillah 2015 committee is doing exactly that for our synagogue, thank goodness. But it can be easy for all of us, accustomed to functioning as “consumers,” as buyers and users of things—to mistake synagogue membership for a means of purchase—annual dues as the price for buying meaning, spiritual fulfillment and Jewish identity.

Ultimately, what the synagogue has to offer cannot be bought or sold—or wasted or used up, thank goodness. Meaning, connection to the sacred, community—all grow from participation, from giving and receiving, from daily acts of Jewish involvement. And the synagogue is the place where all of these happen. If you have joined in celebrating a bris, a naming, a bar/bat mitzvah or a wedding; attended a shiva minyan or funeral to comfort the

bereaved; brought food to a family in crisis or helped out by giving a neighborhood kid lift to the religious school; helped make a minyan or contributed to the oneg on Shabbat; received support from the community at a critical time; shlepped hardboiled eggs and matzah for one of the preschool's or religious school's seders; participated on a committee that helps our synagogue to thrive, attended an adult ed or study session and left richer in understanding of your own life and our tradition; experienced a spark of the transcendent in the rhythm and power of a communal melody; felt God's presence in the quiet of our sanctuary; helped out in our annual food drive or helped to organize our community to fight Amendment One—if you have participated in and drawn from the community in any of these ways, or in the myriad of others that could so easily be added to this extensive list—then you know what I am talking about.

Membership dues and ongoing financial support of the Kehillah are not the price tags by which one acquires the good stuff; rather, they're the expense which all of us must necessarily share to sustain the institution. The “good stuff” happens and grows when we participate in this sacred community, called to live our values—called to holiness.

Rabbi Schulweiss quotes the great 15<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Adar Banal, who said the sanctuary and the synagogue are needed “to combat the idea that God is in the heavens.” After all, in God's command to the people and Moses, God says build me a sanctuary so that I can dwell *b'toch-am*, in them. Not *b'tocho*, in it, but *b'tocham*, in them. The synagogue is the sacred space that brings us together—and then God dwells in our midst, in the bonds of community.

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, all of us have, for this morning at least, stepped out of the marketplace and into this synagogue. Together we create and draw meaning from an experience that has sustained our people for thousands of years. May we remember, in this New Year, that what our souls are so hungry for is right here; and may we have the wisdom and strength to sustain this community as we are sustained by it. May we go from strength to strength together; and so may it be a year of fulfillment, of goodness, and of abundant blessing.