

Chazak Chazak V'Nitchazek

Rosh Hashanah Evening - September 18, 2009
Temple Beth Torah – Fremont, California
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I have been a fan of Garrison Keillor for a long time. For well over twenty years, I have listened to Prairie Home Companion, his Saturday night radio broadcast. During the show, Keillor spotlights various musical guests and tells stories about such characters as Guy Noir, Private Eye, and two cowboys named Dusty and Lefty. The highlight of Prairie Home Companion is Garrison Keillor's monologue about the residents of Lake Wobegone, a fictional town in Minnesota. Keillor always begins his story by saying: "Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, my hometown, out on the edge of the prairie." After this opening line, Keillor goes on to spin a yarn about the personalities who inhabit his hometown and the quirky things that go wrong in their lives.

Sometimes, I think of us at Temple Beth Torah as being like the inhabitants of Lake Wobegone. For those who have been around this congregation for more than a few years, it feels like a small town where everyone really does know each other. Like the residents of Lake Wobegone, we have our fair share of characters, but we are tolerant of each other's foibles. Like every community, we have our customs and rituals. And like the residents of any town, we take particular pride in the accomplishments of our children.

On the surface, there are some striking similarities between our congregation and Lake Wobegone. However, when we compare the two communities, there is one key difference. Lake Wobegone exists in an imaginary world. Nothing much happens from day to day or week to week or even year to year. When Garrison Keillor begins his story by saying, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegone, my hometown" we're assured that this place that time forgot lies undisturbed by the broader forces affecting our nation.

However, in contrast, I could hardly begin a story about Temple Beth Torah by saying: "It's been a quiet week at Temple Beth Torah, my home congregation." No week has been truly quiet here, for unlike the residents of Lake Wobegone, we live in a real world. We are impacted by events

taking place in our community, in our nation, and around the world. Our lives lack the quiet serenity of those who live in Lake Wobegone. If anything, as I look back over events since we last gathered for Rosh Hashanah, I can honestly say I can never remember a more turbulent and unsettling year.

We have all been shaken this past year by one crisis after another. The severe downturn in our economy has affected every single American. The bleak statistics are sadly familiar and so I will be brief by stating what so many of you already know: The United States is in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Since December 2007, our country has lost 7 million jobs. The Federal government announced that 9.7% of the total work force is out of work; equaling 14.5 million people unemployed.

Across California, it's very difficult for many people right now. The Governor and state legislators finally, after months of stalemate, reached a budget agreement, but they only reached this agreement in part by stripping counties and municipalities of statewide funds. The budget is balanced on the backs of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. As a result, local governments and social service agencies have the impossible task of trying to provide for a greatly increased number of clients and they have fewer funds to do so. As for our public schools, more students than ever are crowded into classrooms. Teachers are forced to accomplish even more with fewer resources available.

Here, in the state of California, the unemployment rate is even greater than the average across the nation. Statewide unemployment is 12.2%. With the anticipated closing of NUMMI next March, the number of locally unemployed will undoubtedly rise even higher.

Here at Temple, we all know people who have been laid off work and who are seeking new positions. Some have been looking for a job for many months. National statistics indicate that about one out of every three job seekers has been unemployed for more than six months. We all know great people who have extensive work experience who simply cannot find employment because in this economy most businesses just are not hiring.

For those who have been out-of-work for weeks or months, looking for a new position is draining. Submitting your resume and knowing so many others are applying for the same job is debilitating. You try to keep your head up, to stay optimistic, to not get down on yourself, but sometimes it is just so hard to do.

Anxiety mounts as the unemployed worry: How will we pay our bills? How will we provide for our families? How will we make ends meet?

For those who do have a job, there is much to worry about as well. Workers are anxious about whether they will still be employed in the months ahead. Will our companies downsize even more? Will there be further cutbacks in salary and benefits?

Meanwhile, everyone faces rising costs. Health care premiums continue to climb. The cost of sending our children to college increases every year. Once thought of as a rock solid investment, the value of our homes has dropped considerably. So have retirement funds that have in the past year plummeted along with the stock market. As a result, the possibility of retiring from work has been extended, if not postponed indefinitely.

In this last year, we have seen dreams diminished, and worry and anxiety increased. This past year has been the most difficult year economically that most of us can remember. It's been a harsh time for many members of our congregation and it is important for us to acknowledge the pain so many are enduring. However, it is vital that we never ever lose hope. We are going through a very difficult time, and for some, the worst may not be over. Yet, we have to maintain our optimism in the face of enormous challenges. We cannot afford to give in to despair. Instead, on this sacred night of Rosh Hashanah, we can find strength in our enduring faith in God. We can discover wisdom and guidance in our tradition. Over the course of 4000 years, the Jewish people have overcome countless challenges. We have developed communal resources that enable us to surmount difficulties we face.

As a Jewish congregation, we do not exist alone and isolated. Not everyone is aware of the support systems we have within the broader Jewish community. Fortunately, here in the Bay Area, we can take advantage of community wide resources that are available. There are local Jewish agencies that are responding to pressing needs in our community with energy and determination. The Jewish Vocational Service is offering help for job seekers unable to find work. You may recall the workshop that the JVS offered here at Temple last July. The Jewish Vocational Service continues to offer workshops around the Bay Area, as well as one-on-one counseling to help people get back on their feet.

For those in our community who need immediate financial assistance, the Hebrew Free Loan Association exists to provide funds for critical needs. For over 100 years, the Hebrew Free Loan Association has provided "interest free loans to Jewish individuals and families for emergencies, personal financial challenges, tuition and education-related costs, first-time

home purchases, debt consolidation, and special medical needs. Today more than 1,000 members of the Jewish community have loans totaling 4.2 million dollars from this agency.

Vocational counseling and interest-free loans can be vitally important during this challenging time, as can psychological counseling. Sometimes, what individuals and families need most is learning how to cope with difficult issues. The Jewish Family and Children's Service offers counseling for anyone who requests their assistance. The JFCS makes their services available on a sliding fee scale, and if needed, will offer professional counseling at no cost at all. There should be no stigma attached whatsoever to anyone who says – "I feel overwhelmed by my problems and I need help figuring out how to cope." Indeed, it is a sign of strength when someone recognizes that he or she just cannot go it alone, and desires psychological assistance.

The Jewish Vocational Service, the Hebrew Free Loan Association, and the Jewish Family and Children's Service exist to aid our community. Information about all three agencies is available in our lobby. No one should have to feel like you are going through this economic crisis alone. I encourage you to avail yourselves of their services.

In this New Year, we can turn to communal organizations to find the support we need. We can continue, as members of a holy congregation, to offer strength to one another through our deeds of kindness. We each have the ability to lift another's spirit and fortify his or her resolve. I know many people in our congregation who give generously of their time and resources to others. Meals have been cooked and delivered to people's homes. Transportation has been given to those unable to drive. Hospital visits and phone calls to shut-ins have touched lives. The everyday kindnesses of our members, and the work of our Chevra Chesed committee, have lifted others. Hope can be rekindled by a kind word, a meal provided, a smile given. As we begin this New Year, let us remind ourselves of our capacity for kindness. We are each capable of making a difference in someone else's life.

I know that the leadership of our congregation will continue to focus on the well being of our membership. In this past year, our officers and board of directors have worked exceedingly hard to respond to those in need. As always, no one has been turned away from membership based on financial need. No one has been denied a religious education based on the inability to pay tuition. Our leadership strives to fulfill the appellation given to Jews – that we are Rachamim B'nei Rachamim, Jews who act with

empathy and understanding. I know that the leadership of Temple Beth Torah will continue in this New Year to guide our congregation through the challenges that lie ahead with determination and skill.

In Jewish life, when we reach the end of a book of Torah, we say *Chazak Chazak V'nitchazek*, Let us be strong, and let us strengthen one another. As we close the book on the year that has passed, let us say as well: *Chazak Chazak V'nitchazek*, let us maintain our strengths as a holy congregation, as we continue to give support to one another.

Let us fortify ourselves by utilizing communal resources. Let us give strength to one another through deeds of kindness. And let us build up our spirits through our worship as a congregation during these Yamim Noraim, these High Holy Days.

On this sacred night of Rosh Hashanah, we pray: May God bless us with *parnassah*, with prosperity, so that we may live with sufficient resources to provide for our family, our congregation, and ourselves. May God bless us with *rachmanut*, so that we respond to those in need in our community with compassion and understanding. May God bless us with *shalom*, so that our nation and our world, so fractured and broken, may in the coming year, be healed and made whole.

Adonai Oz L'amo Yitein, May God give strength unto God's people;
Adonai Yevareich Et Amo Vashalom, May God bless us with *parnassah*, prosperity, with *rachamanut*, compassion, and with *shalom*, peace.

Amen.