

Rabbi Joshua Waxman  
Or Hadash: A Reconstructionist Congregation  
Yom Kippur 5772

“Who is rich?” the Mishnah famously asks: “*Eizehu ashir?*” It’s a question that’s been on many people’s minds in the run-up to next year’s presidential election when so much of the debate has focused on the question of the economy and jobs. This was, of course, the central issue in the last election cycle as well and, while things are better now than they were then, they’re not *enough* better. Many Americans are still hurting. While many of the large companies have returned to profitability this hasn’t translated into lots of jobs: the unemployment rate still stands above nine percent and those who are finding work are often returning to scaled back positions. The worst excesses of health care costs may have been reined in, if the Supreme Court doesn’t declare the new health care law unconstitutional, but prices are still rising at a rate that threatens both individuals and employers. Home values are way down and whatever savings families had managed to put away over the years through sacrifice and self-discipline were first ravaged by the crash of the banks in the United States and are now threatened by concerns that what happens in Greece – or Italy, or Ireland, or Portugal – could bring the markets back to the brink of disaster.

There’s a lot of anxiety and uncertainty and so, in the best spirit of American electioneering, there’s no shortage among politicians of finger pointing, much of which centers on whether the wealthy, *or* small business owners, *or* hedge fund managers, *or* Warren Buffet are paying their fair share, *or* too much, *or* too little. The president in his most recent jobs proposal wants to close tax loopholes and limit deductions for the rich, defined as families earning more than \$250,000 a year. Senate Democrats recently proposed a plan that suggests the appropriate annual income to qualify as rich is one million dollars. Mitt Romney, on the other hand, who has a personal fortune generally estimated to be in excess of two hundred million dollars, refuses to classify himself as rich and says he won’t break down the definition of rich and poor. Which makes the Mishnah’s question all the more striking: *Eizehu ashir?* Who is rich?

The answer it offers is an incisive one: “*Hasame’ach b’chelko*” – “he who is satisfied with his portion.” It’s a beautiful and powerful spiritual teaching about acceptance, about considering what our true needs are, about the way greed and desire fuel our discontent and can easily drive us from satisfaction to misery. The Mishnah’s answer contains a profound spiritual truth, in effect, answering the question of Who is rich by urging us to reexamine our assumptions of what ‘rich’ means and defining wealth more in terms of spiritual and emotional equanimity than material possessions – which is true, as far as it goes. But while spiritual and emotional equanimity may increase our overall wellbeing, they don’t put food on the table, or pay the mortgage, or cover the costs of medical bills when we get sick. In other words, the Mishnah may have solved the problem of riches, but it hasn’t solved the problem of actually paying for things.

And so, stuck between the poles of scrambling to pay for things on the one hand and convincing ourselves to be satisfied with whatever we have on the other, we might ask: Is there an alternative? Is there a way to make sure both our physical *and* spiritual needs are cared for and that we are not just hapless victims tossed to and fro by the whims of a global economy? I think there is, and I think it is intimately connected with this Holiday of Yom Kippur.

The issue, I think, has to do with independence. We invest a huge amount of time and energy into making ourselves independent: self-sufficient, capable of standing on our own two feet, able to get by on our own. It’s a cornerstone of the way we approach life as Americans, from the Protestant work to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* : trying to build strong, secure lives that insulate us from whatever is happening in the world around us because we do not need to rely on anyone other than ourselves. It’s an attractive proposition, practically axiomatic: we feel more secure when we believe we

are in control, that our fate, our destiny is in our own hands. If we work hard enough, save enough money, build strong enough walls we will be safe and secure. Prosperity is often tied in our society to this sense of independence. ‘Who is rich?’ I imagine many Americans would say the person who has enough resources to provide a secure future for himself and his family.

But the question is what kind of resources. One of our congregants, Susan, is not with us at synagogue this morning but has given me permission to share her story. She dearly wants to be with us but has been largely homebound ever since being incapacitated by a fluke accident last January. Before the accident, Susan was one of the most energetic people I know, someone who was always there for other people – active, cheerful, giving, participating and building connections through involvement in the adult b’nai mitzvah class, in the Purimspiel, in Torah study, and through many other synagogue activities. Now she is debilitated and in constant pain. She had to stop working, has practically ceased coming to shul, and has scaled all her other activities way down.

In the face of this sort of devastating setback, financial resources can take you only so far. But Susan and her husband Paul are fortunate to be rich in other sorts of resources as well. Since the accident, Susan says, this community has tirelessly rallied around her – with meals, with visits, with rides to the doctor and, with her family, is her greatest source of strength in facing the pain she experiences daily. The comfort of a visit from someone you know – and, more to the point, even from someone you *don’t* know but who reaches out to you because you are part of their community – is something that simply cannot be qualified in dollars and cents, and yields results that those dollars and cents could never purchase: in terms of wellbeing, in terms of knowing she is cared for, and in terms of not feeling cut off from the world – to say nothing of meals and other gifts that people bring when they come. When I spoke with Susan yesterday she asked me to be sure to extend her and Paul’s thanks to each and every one of you who make up this community. And Susan’s story is just one example: the same compassion and support are being extended to many other congregants facing difficult times of their own, coordinated by our truly amazing Hesed committee chair, Shelley Sanders, who enables us to do the *mitzvah* of caring for the people in our community who need help.

Susan’s true wealth, in other words, doesn’t come from money. For Susan and other people in her position – which is to say for *any* of us who can unexpectedly find our circumstances suddenly changed for the worse through illness, loss of a job, an accident – wealth comes from having deep ties to the people around us, ties we strengthen through years of being there for other people when they are in need and who will do the same for us when we need help. Susan is rich in *relationships*, the kind of enduring bonds that support us and sustain us in ways that money alone cannot.

We put a lot of time and energy into building up material resources – into our work, our retirement funds, our home equity in pursuit of security and independence. But as we have painfully learned over the past years, these are resources that we can spend a lifetime amassing but that can be wiped out in a moment. These are not resources on which we can rely as much as we may have thought, that allow us to truly thrive and prosper. I don’t mean for a moment to say we shouldn’t put aside money to prepare for the future – it would be blatantly irresponsible not to and, in fact, Jewish law is specific in its denunciation of a person who does not manage his or her assets responsibly and so becomes a burden on society. What I *am* suggesting is that at the same time that we make responsible financial decisions, we should also be focusing on building up our truer and more enduring resources, in the form of relationships, personal connections, and community. These resources, which are there for us always and *especially* at the most difficult times, are a source of true, enduring wealth, more powerful and far more reliable than anything we could hope to purchase with our money. Money *may* after all be able to provide for our physical needs, although this is far from certain; and it cannot offer the hope, resilience, nurture, and support that our relationships can. In the words of one famous rabbi, “I don’t care too much for money, money can’t buy me love.”

In his book about the small town of Hardwick, Vermont entitled *The Town That Food Saved*, author Ben Hewitt suggests that in times such as these instead of basing our security on accumulating assets, we need to envision a new understanding of wealth. True wealth, Hewitt argues, comes from our connections with the people around us and the sense of caring for and about others, and being cared for in return. The people of Hardwick, he notes, have pulled together in these tough economic times because they had never walled themselves off from one another, seen their success as separate from that of the people around them. As a small farming community, instead of pursuing independent achievement the townspeople recognized their mutual interdependence, the way they would rise and fall together as a community, a shared sense of destiny. Very few people in Hardwick have lots of money; but on the other hand no one is scared or insecure that they won't be able to make ends meet because they can rely on one another. Hewitt writes, "Money does many things very well, and one of those things is to insulate us from each other. It becomes a safety net, and when we carry a safety net made of cash, we allow the one made of community to slip through our fingers."

Community is a true source of strength and security, one not subject to the vagaries of the economic climate, one that teaches us the difficult lesson *not* of trying to depend on ourselves but of being willing to depend on one another. In her reliance on our community, Susan is not independent: quite the opposite. But her wealth comes precisely from her interdependence, from knowing she can count on others just as they have counted on her. The wisdom and deep strength of interdependence are a hallmark of what it means to be part of a community, but it doesn't just happen automatically. You really do get out of community what you put in. The more someone has actively connected into the community, the more someone has given of themselves by showing up, by participating, by lending a helping hand, the more connections they will have made and the more others will reflexively be there for them when times are hard.

But community is not just as a safety net in case we get into trouble: living in community enhances our everyday life, rooting us, grounding us, connecting us to a source of wisdom and purpose larger than ourselves. Community forges connections that are all the more precious in a world where we move in our separate social and professional spheres, slip by one another in cars, may not know our neighbors beyond a wave and to say hello, race from one place to another without having a sense that there is any place that we truly *belong*. Community is the antidote to the isolation and anonymity that are often the unseen cost of chasing our own separate pursuits. Life is richer when lived together than when lived apart – when we cast off a measure of our cherished independence and recognize the deeper truth of interconnectivity and interdependence. True prosperity, it turns out, comes not from investing in stocks and bonds, but in investing in relationships and people. *Eizehu ashir?* Who is rich? The one who builds and lives in community.

At Or Hadash we have the tremendous privilege and responsibility of being in community. There are people in this room who have known one another for over fifty years and there are people in this room who may have met for the first time this morning. There also may be people here who are not part of our community and of course we are honored you choose to pray with us; and you are also welcome to join and become a part of who we are: an inclusive community of caring, compassionate people joined together by a sense of common purpose, shared destiny, a dedication to vibrant contemporary Judaism, and commitment to social justice. This community has beauty, it has resilience, and it has profound power in the ways our lives and dreams are woven together. It is why it is an honor to stand with all of you today.

Throughout Yom Kippur we stress the centrality of community, the idea of interdependence. We come together praying for forgiveness as one people, as one community. Although we are enjoined to atone individually for our wrongdoings from the past year, nonetheless we confess them in the plural: *ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu* – we have sinned, we have betrayed, we have stolen. Of course it is not the case that all of us have committed all of these offenses. Yet speaking them anyway reminds us that our

individual actions are not so separate from those of the people around us as we might like to think, and that their actions in turn are not so separate from ours. For better or for worse, we are bound together with the people in our lives – with friends, with family... and with community. And what any one of us does affects who all of us are. And so we seek forgiveness together, communally: on Yom Kippur we stand together before God, all complicit, all connected.

Who is rich? The challenge of Yom Kippur is to reimagine prosperity, to be able to meet the uncertain fate that the New Year holds in store for us not by trying to build bigger and stronger walls for ourselves which cannot protect us and serve only to cut us off, but on the contrary by tearing down walls and cultivating the connections that are our best shelter and support in the face of whatever may come. By investing in one another with love and generosity that will be returned with interest when the time comes. By recognizing that true wealth and security come from being connected to and intertwined with the people around us for, in the end, they are the best we have.

Who is rich? We all are – in community, together.