

**SHEMINI ATZERET**  
**OCTOBER 10, 2009**  
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For a Jew, this is supposed to be the most joyous time of the year. Indeed, Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret are referred to as the “Zeman Simchateinu” – the season of our rejoicing. This was the time of year that the Jew felt most prosperous; the harvest had been tilled, the granaries were full ... giving Sukkot the title: “Chag Haasif” – the season of the gathering.

But not this year! This year, with the harvest over, we realize that we have less – not more. There are people here who have lost their jobs. There are others who still have jobs but they are earning less than they did a year ago. For many of us, the money we had put aside for our retirement has shrunk. As more than one person has put it, “My 401-K has become a 201-K.” And we’re not quite sure where it went. “I used to have it; I didn’t spend it, why don’t I have it any more?” Suddenly the question “how much do we have?” has changed into “how much do we have left?” Some Zeman Simchateinu!

Now, it is easy enough to say that for most of us, the answer to the question “how much do I have left?” will be, if you still have a roof over your head and food on the table, you probably have more left than you realize. In many ways, all of us are living better today than the Czar of Russia did one hundred years ago (and I’m not referring to after he was deposed and about to be shot; I’m talking about when he was at the peak of his power.) Our home is probably more comfortable than his was in many ways, with electricity, heat and air conditioning. Transportation and communication available to us, the entertainment we have access to, goes beyond anything he could have known.

And yet there is a sense of concern within all of us. Things are not what they were ... and may never be again. We all feel vulnerable in different ways, affecting us in different ways. I found two examples of this: one in an article in the Wall Street Journal, and the other in an article in the New York Times. The article in the Wall Street Journal pointed out that while the real estate market is way down, there is one kind of real estate that is selling well ... and that is: cemetery lots! In an article entitled, “Where Real Estate is Still Hot,” it tells of many people who are so stretched for money that they are selling their burial plots ... even those that are part of family plots. What they’ll do when they die? , They’ll worry about that then. But for now they have to give up sacred ground in order to pay their bills.

The article in the New York Times provided another indication of the effect the financial recession has been. Forgive me for pointing it out, but it seems that there has been a drop in the sale of men’s underwear. I’m not making this up! (Although I’m certainly capable of doing that!) I quote to you from the article: “The research firm Mintel projects that men’s underwear sales will fall 2.3% this year as men stretch out the life span of their boxers or briefs ... The last thing you’re going to do when you are short on cash is go and replace your underwear.”

These are challenging times, for sure. If you’ve got to give up your burial plot ... if you’ve got to give up new underwear ... what comes next? I know one rabbi who had to give up his job. His shul didn’t dump him ... he dumped his shul! It was once a major Orthodox

congregation in Florida but its membership dropped radically in recent years, and in recent months they weren't able to pay the rabbi. So you know what happened? The rabbi didn't show up on Rosh Hashana! None of us are immune! How would I feel if I had to give up my burial plot, my underwear, and my job? I know how one person felt ... a member of our congregation who came to my office and told me that he had lost his job and he felt like he was a "nothing." His words made me think of a scene in Arthur Miller's play "Incident in Vichy." France has fallen to the Nazis. In one French village, all citizens are required to register with the authorities. One man, a prominent person in town, comes before the Nazi clerk with a briefcase full of diplomas, certificates, honors bestowed on him, to impress the official with what an important man he is. The clerk looks at it and says to him, "Is this everything you have?" The man answers, "Yes." The clerk throws it all in the wastebasket and says, "Good, now you have nothing." And you can see the man visibly deflate.

Would that happen to us? If we had to give up our jobs, our plots and our middle-class lifestyle, would we think that we are a "nothing?" There are a lot of people who think like that! There are people who only define themselves by their jobs. Ask them what they are and they'll say, "a doctor" or "a lawyer" or "a dentist" as if that really defines you. Are you familiar with the expression "going postal?" A man loses his job and is so distraught that he goes home, gets a gun, and sets out to kill the people who fired him and his former co-workers who still have jobs. And he feels justified doing it, because to him, his job *was* his life and by taking away his job, those people were taking his life.

So let me ask you ... let me ask *me*: At a time when so many are being asked to give up so many luxuries, indeed, so many necessities, is there anything that you could think of that you just could not live without? The Talmud answers this question by telling us: "A disciple of the wise may not live in a city which lacks one of the following ten things: a court, a charity treasury with two collectors and three distributors, a synagogue, a public bathhouse, sanitary services, a physician, an artisan, a barber, a butcher, and a teacher of the young." These are ten things that we just can't live without, says the Talmud. But I venture to say that many of us, indeed most all of us, could learn to live without these things. Some of us do, in fact, live without these. So, what if anything, could you not live without? Of course, our children might say: their iPod and their cell phone. But what would you say? Is there anything that you have that is truly irreplaceable? Is there anything that, if you were forced to give it up, would make you think you were worthless? I can't answer for you ... but I can answer for me: nothing! But read that not as one word, but as two: no thing. There is no thing in this world that I can think of that I couldn't live without ... that I couldn't replace ... that not having it would destroy my self-worth. No thing. And a person who would agree with me is a person who has a lot of "things" ... so many that he was recently featured in a New York Times article for having donated ten million dollars to the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. His name is David Rubinstein, and he was born right here in Baltimore. His father sorted mail for the U.S. Postal Service and his mother was a homemaker. "When I was growing up I didn't think about money because I didn't have any money," he says. But that didn't stop him from rising to the position of Director of the Carlyle Group that he helped found and has amassed a fortune worth some \$2.7 billion. But you know what he's doing with that fortune? He's giving it away! And you know what else? Upon recently turning 60, he said, "I would give up all the money I have if I could be 50!" Yes, Mr. Rubinstein is someone who understands that there is more to life than money. There is life itself!

And there is another Jew who agrees with him. Her name is Elizabeth Taylor. Some years ago she was robbed. Thieves broke into her safe deposit box and stole her jewelry (which I imagine was quite a lot – she has at least six engagement rings!). After the robbery, reporters asked

her: “Did you cry?” And she replied, “I don’t cry for things that won’t cry for me!” It was as simple and basic as that!

I know another Jew ... a Jew smarter and wealthier than David Rubinstein and Elizabeth Taylor. But he most certainly agrees with them. His name is King Solomon. And we learn what he has to say about “things.” He was a man with lots of “things” and yet, in the book of Ecclesiastes that we read this morning, he tells us:

I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards:

I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits:

I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees:

I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me:

I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts.

So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.

And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour.

Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

So, does that mean that nothing counts? Does that mean that everything in life is simply vanity? Does that mean that nothing has any meaning? Yes! No “thing” has meaning. But you and your family do! Let me make it clear by quoting to you the words of Ann Erni. Fortune Magazine asked her of her thoughts on the collapse of Lehman Bros. where she was the former managing director and Chief Diversity Officer. She writes: “I’ve heard so many people say that they’ll never let themselves ... define themselves by their job ... at the end of the day, it’s you and your family.”

And in case you don’t know what Ms. Erni meant, let me quote you the words of Sam Walton, the multi-billionaire CEO of Wal Mart, who laying on his deathbed said these three words: “I blew it.” That’s how he evaluated his life because of the little time he spent with his wife, children and grandchildren.

And just in case ... just in case ... you still don’t get it, then let me quote to you the words of Neil Armstrong, the man who made it to the moon, but didn’t feel that he had “made it” here on earth when he said: “The one thing that I regret was that my work required an enormous

amount of my time and a lot of travel, and I didn't get to spend the time I would have liked with my family as they were growing up."

And that is why, my friends, when that member of our synagogue said to me that after losing his job, he was a "nothing," I asked him if his family felt that way about him ... and he smiled and said, "Rabbi, that's the first time I've smiled in quite a while!"

If there is anything good to come of this recession, perhaps it is its ability to remind us that there are a lot of things we can live without, but we can't live without our family. And the members of our families don't want to live without us, no matter how much we do – or do not – make. And in a very real sense that is God's message to us on this holiday of Shemini Atzeret. This holiday is a strange one ... it is not a part of Sukkot ... it stands on its own. But it has no special rituals or unique symbols associated with it. So why is it there? According to our sages, it is on this day that God, after feeling close to all of us during this month of holidays, has difficulty seeing us going back to business as usual, and He says, "*Ikvu imi od yom kowshew alei preidaschem* – stay with me another day, your parting is difficult for me." God wants to hold on to *us* ... not to things. He's not going to miss our shofar or our lulav or essrog or succah. He's going to miss *us*.

When you think about it, that's what yizkor is all about. There is no prayer, no service over "things" that are lost ... only over people. They are the ones whom, after all is said and done, we have difficulty letting go of. Visit the cemeteries, as many of us do at this season. Tell me if you find one headstone that reads "top-rated salesman," "outstanding CEO," "real good with numbers." No, you know what they read: beloved husband and father, cherished wife, mother and grandmother, dear friend. That's what endures, that's what matters.

You know, this day of Shemini Atzeret also serves as the concluding day of Sukkot in the Diaspora. We celebrate Sukkot by building a small annex to our homes, just a few boards and branches, inviting friends in and drinking in it and eating fruit in it for the week of the holiday. Sukkot is the holiday of change! Sukkot is a celebration of the beauty of things that don't last. The little hut which is so vulnerable to wind and rain and will be dismantled at week's end; the ripe fruits which will spoil if not picked and eaten right away; the friends and family who may not be with us for as long as we would wish; the beauty of the leaves changing color as they begin the process of falling and dying from the trees. Sukkot comes to tell us that the world is full of good and beautiful things. But that we have to enjoy them right away today because they will not last. They will not wait for us to finish other things and get around to them. Let us hold on tight to those we love and to those things which truly matter in life. If reconciliation is within our reach, let us reach out now! So that when that moment arrives, that inevitable moment comes when we are gone - our children will someday gather to say Yizkor for us as we now do for our parents...blessing their names for having lived and shared...given and cared. Amen.

\*\*This sermon is based on the thoughts of Rabbi Harold Kushner.  
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