

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
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This was the year that it could honestly be said: The Grinch stole Thanksgiving!

Thanksgiving is a great American holiday, bringing together families to celebrate and give thanks for all that we have. But this year that wasn't easy to do because for most all of us, this year we don't have what we had last year. The American economy – the world economy – stands on very shaky ground. No one knows what the future will bring because few of us have experienced this before. Every poll and every survey shows that the major focus of all Americans is on the economy, an economy that Alan Greenspan – the former head of the Federal Reserve – labeled a “once in a century credit tsunami.” It is hard to be thankful when you feel that your assets are drowning.

Now, as most all of you know, I am by nature the eternal optimist. You ask me if the glass is half full or half empty, and I'll invariably see the glass as being at least three-quarters full. And my own glass always runneth over. But what positive message can I give you on this Thanksgiving weekend? Is there anything good to say about what we are experiencing? I've searched for answers and I have found some. I've read through the sermons of some of my colleagues, read the papers of sociologists and I can list for you all of the good that is coming out of this experience.

First, we are learning how foolish we were in our spending ways. All of a sudden, our paying \$4 for a cup of coffee because it is called a “latte” does look pretty ridiculous. And paying for bottled water didn't really make much sense after all. And from those dollars wasted, it turned into tens of thousands of dollars wasted when we went and expanded our bathrooms to include toilet-side technology, so that in our bathrooms we could have LCD screens, waterproof touch screen monitors, \$2000 vanity mirrors, a \$5000 Japanese model toilet seat with heat, a \$24,000 shower that also gives you a tan, a \$4000 towel warmer and a multi-media bathroom system that could reach \$200,000.

The downturn in the economy reminds us how foolish we were to be buying those books that guaranteed to make us rich; book like: Smart Couples Finish Rich, Smart Women Finish Rich, The Automatic Millionaire, Rich Dad ... Poor Dad, The Automatic Millionaire Homeowner, Secrets of the Millionaire Mind, The One Minute Millionaire, Nothing Down: How to Buy Real Estate With Little or No Money Down ... now we know that if we really wanted to make money, instead of buying those books, the money spent on them would have been better served by investing in government bonds.

Somewhere down the line we lost it! We thought everything was coming to us ... kids in their 20's were buying million dollar homes, and a two-car garage was no longer big enough. Now, maybe we know better.

And now, maybe, General Motors knows better. For years many of us knew that foreign-made cars were better than those made by American companies. But American companies just kept putting their money into gas-guzzling SUV's. Now these car manufacturers want the tax payers to bail them out! To bail them out to do what? More of the same? Maybe now they have learned a lesson.

And maybe now companies across America have learned a lesson about what they pay their CEO's. Let me tell you about one. His name is Philip Purcell and he was the Chairman and CEO of Morgan Stanley. In 2005 the company decided to replace him. And so, as a parting gift they gave him an exit package estimated at \$113 million. \$113 million because they *didn't* like the job he did! Imagine what they would have given him if they liked him! One has to expect that this economic downturn will change all that.

And I must tell you, I have read sermons and articles describing other benefits from our financial crisis. Families are closer together; people don't travel as much as they used to, more are sticking closer to home creating more family time. It is even being maintained that as a result of the financial crisis, there may be fewer divorces! People won't be able to afford to get divorced!

Yes, there is a case to be made that there is so much good that is coming out of this current situation, but I want to tell you: I don't believe it! I don't accept it! To me, there is *nothing* good about the current turmoil. And I say that first of all, because I've lost money! Nothing good about that! As the line now goes: My 401K has turned into a 301K. There is nothing good about a situation where millions of people in retirement, or who planned on retiring, now have to consider going back to work, and now have to worry about how to make ends meet. There is nothing good about a situation where people who need to move in to assisted living facilities can't do so because they cannot sell their homes. There is nothing good about a situation where people are afraid to buy gift cards from stores because they're not sure if the stores are going to make it ... nothing good about a situation where Circuit City has filed for Chapter 11 and Eddie Bauer is closing 27 stores and J. Jill is closing all of its stores, and The Gap is closing 85 stores, and Linens & Things are closing all their stores, and so is Sharper Image and Wilson Leather. There is nothing good about a situation where a CitiGroup announced that they will lay off 50,000 people! Where are all these people going to get a job in this economy? They are going to join millions and millions of others who are now unemployed, and who right now see little – if anything – on the horizon.

And yes, there is a Jewish dimension to this as well ... and it is not a good one. Many of the leading companies that have disappeared, such as Bear Sterns and Lehman Brothers, were known as "Jewish firms." Jews are very prominent in the investment business, and their losses became our losses. Charitable organizations are bound to suffer, and parents are going to find it even more challenging to give their children a day school education.

There is nothing good to say about all this! In ancient times, when Jewish communities faced a drought that threatened economic devastation, they didn't go searching for a silver lining. Instead, they gathered in the town square and fasted and prayed for rain.

So, what are we to do? I would answer very simply: let's maintain our perspective. Let's remember an important lesson from a modern Jewish man and an ancient Jewish woman.

Ben Stein is a writer, economist, humorist, and the son of Herbert Stein, a well known economist who was the head of President Richard Nixon's Council of Economic Advisors. Ben Stein writes the following about his father:

My father entered Williams College in Williamstown, Mass. in September, 1931, The United States was entering the downswing of a small uptick at the beginning of what would become the worst industrial depression in its history. My father's father was unemployed at the

time. He was a skilled tool-and-die maker but no one needed someone with those skills during the depression. His mother was a sales clerk in a department store in Schenectady, New York, not exactly a lucrative position then or now. And so my father came to Williams College with no money, no financial reserves, and no social connections. He told me of many jobs that he had while he was at Williams, but one stays in my memory. My father had a job, thanks to a kindly man named Taylor Ostrander, who managed a fraternity house called Sigma Psi. My father's job was to wash the dishes after every meal, three times a day, in the basement of the fraternity house. After the boys finished their meals, it was his job to carry their dishes down to the basement and wash and dry them there. He worked at a huge sink, with steam rising, and with detergent getting on his unimaginably soft hands. He wore a stocking cap in order to keep his curly hair from getting caught in the water or the soap. It was the 1930s, and Jews were not allowed in any of the fraternities at Williams College. Many years later, by which time my father had become a famous economist and a major figure in Washington society, I asked him if he felt angry about having to wash dishes in order to pay his way through school in a fraternity that didn't admit Jews. And I still remember his answer. He said to me: "Are you kidding? Not at all! I couldn't afford the luxury of being angry. I was just grateful to have a job so that I could go to one of the best schools in the country."

Ben Stein says, "I think that that was the secret ingredient, aside from astonishing intelligence and creativity, in my father's success and in his happiness. He did not feel that he had the luxury of feeling aggrieved. He was just grateful to have a chance. Or, as I like to say, he was just grateful for the opportunities he had been given. And he saw no reason to waste energy feeling aggrieved. What would that ever accomplish?"

Ben Stein says that he thinks about lesson that he learned from his father, the lesson that it is better to feel grateful for the opportunities that you get than it is to feel aggrieved for the things that you don't get, many times in his own life. He says that he was once on a plane going from San Francisco to Denver. He happened to be sitting near the back of the plane, and a number of flight attendants sat right behind him. One was wearing a perfume that he was allergic to, and so he went into an asthma attack in which he simply could not catch his breath for several minutes. When he revived, his first thought was to file a complaint against these flight attendants. But then he thought: "Wait a minute! These poor women are going through a rough time. Do you realize how many flight attendants have seen their jobs eliminated in recent months? And can you imagine how insecure and how anxious those who still have their jobs must feel? Why cause them any more trouble than they already have? I ought to be grateful that I have a job that is less tenuous than theirs is." And he put aside his anger, and let the matter go.

It's a great lesson, you know. Let's maintain our perspective; things could be better, for sure. But things could also be worse. So why waste your energy feeling aggrieved? Peggy Noonan points out in the Wall Street Journal that as bad as the economy is, few of us have lost weight due to it! And remember, we're all in the same boat. Our friends and neighbors are hurting just as we are. Let's go easy on them ... now is not the time to point out their flaws. Now is the time to understand that they are hurting just as we are and the pain we feel for what we have lost should not blind us to what we still have.

Now the lessons from an ancient Jewish woman: To all the daughters of Israel we extend the blessing of: "*Y'semach elokim k'Soro Rivkah Rochail V'Leah* – may God make you to grow to be like the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah." Now, I can understand asking God to make a daughter grow to be like our matriarch Sarah. Sarah was a feisty, gutsy, adventurous woman. And I can understand asking God for a daughter to grow to be like mother Rebecca. Rebecca was a strong-willed, decisive woman. I can understand asking God that our daughters

grow to be a matriarch like Rachel. Rachel, the symbol of compassion, motherly love, crying for her children in exile. But asking to be like Leah? Leah did not have it easy. As a sister, as a wife, as a mother ... her life was a series of ups and downs, of joys and sorrows. What quality did she have that we would want our children to have? Just this: she was able to maintain her perspective. She never turned on her sister, she never turned on herself, she never complained ... she was just grateful for what she had.

And in fact, it was Leah, of all people, who introduced the concept of thanksgiving to the world. When she gave birth to her fourth son, she said, "*Hapaham odeh et Hashem* – this time, *Odeh*, I shall thank the Lord." And she called her son "Yehudah." And, according to our sages, this made Leah the first person to ever express thanks and gratitude to the Almighty. Think about it ... think about all Leah went through in life ... a prettier sister, a reluctant husband, violence amongst her children, a cheating father. And think about the fact that Judah was not her first child – it was her fourth. And think about it ... it wasn't even a girl – it was her fourth son. But Leah was grateful for what she had. She never lost her perspective. And ultimately, it was that son from whom all the kings of Israel and the Messiah himself will be descended.

Ben Stein says that to this day he is the one who insists on doing the dishes at his house after every dinner. He does it in memory of his father. He does it because he gets a certain satisfaction with every swipe of the sponge. He feels that he is wiping away the selfishness of the moment, that he is building a life for his family by doing the dishes just as his father did for him. And he ends his memoir with these two words: "Thanks, Dad."

On this Thanksgiving weekend we, too, can end our prayers with these two words: "Thanks, Dad." Thanks to our Father in heaven, even in difficult times, *shechyianu v'kiyamanu* - for giving us life and sustaining us. Amen.