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HOPEFUL GIVING

L'Shana Tova.

A wonderful story is told about an elderly man who was seen planting a tree. A teenager happened upon the man, who, while looking very determined, was clearly struggling with the task.

The teenager approached, and asked the man if he needed any assistance. The man looked up, mopped his brow, and said, "Thanks all the same, young lady, but I need to plant this tree all by myself."

The teenager was surprised by the answer, and asked the man why he felt the need to plant this tree all by himself. The man's answer forever changed the worldview of the teenager. Said the older man:

"When I was just a kid, not much younger than you, I used to love to go out to the back yard and pick apples from the apple tree. Those apples were the juiciest, freshest, most thirst-quenching apples you have ever tasted."

"So, you want more of those apples, mister?" asked the youngster. "Why don't you just go to the supermarket like everyone else?"

"No, no, that's not it. You see, I never thought about how that apple tree ended up in the yard. I just saw it there, and took the apples, and went on my merry way."

"But now, I am older, and I realize that someone must have planted that tree and that someone was probably a person who came before me and is now long gone. That person gave a gift, without even knowing it."

The gift was one based on hope—the hope that the apple tree would grow and provide apples for many years.

"So, when I bit into an apple the other day, and was reminded of that delicious apple of my youth, I decided that I had to plant an apple tree."

"But it will take years for the tree to produce apples," the teen responded. "Are you are really planting a tree with no hopes of ever enjoying the fruits?"

"Well," said the older man, "if I am able to enjoy the fruits, then it'll be a bonus. I am really planting this tree for someone I don't even know, some other human being who may enjoy apples as much as I do."

As we gather this Yom Kippur, let us all ask ourselves the question asked by the older gentleman in the story. What gifts were we given by people who knew nothing of us? How much has each of us benefited from those anonymous gifts, offerings given only with the promise of hope? And

how many of us, on awakening to the realization that we have all been given so much, have decided to give to others, just as fully, just as anonymously, just as hopefully?

We Jews are now in the midst of the most sacred 24-hour period of the year. As we mark Yom HaKippurim, the day of atonement, we are called to account for all that we have been and all that we dream of becoming.

Yom Kippur demands that we delve into our souls, take a look around, figure out what needs repairing or updating, and start that sacred work.

Our tradition teaches that the hallmark of Yom Kippur is Tshuvah, repentance. We are called by the Shofar and our own consciences to review our actions and begin to make whatever changes are necessary. The message is beautiful and powerful, but also challenging. Confronting our own reality is never easy.

Our patriarch Joseph faced this problem when he re-encountered his brothers. After being sold into slavery, Joseph emerged in Egypt as a powerful leader. And the older brothers, who once tormented their kid brother Joseph, found themselves in Egypt seeking food during a famine. So there stood Joseph, his brothers-turned-tormentors before his very eyes.

Joseph could have chosen to respond to his brothers with animosity, a reaction any of us could conjure. Instead, after a test, Joseph responded with gifts. Joseph gave his brothers not just material gifts in the form of food and shelter, but also a spiritual gift. By giving his brothers new livelihoods in Egypt, Joseph gave his brothers even more. He gave them hope. The story of Joseph teaches us much about repentance. When we decide to make Tshuvah, repentance, two more values come to the fore: Tzedakah, giving, and Tikvah, hope.

As we take stock of ourselves and seek forgiveness, these truths undoubtedly emerge: we can all give more of ourselves, and we all need hope. Repentance and renewal need more than prayer. Repentance and renewal need action to become complete. Tshuvah needs Tzedakah, and when we give, that Tzedakah produces Tikvah.

So as we atone for our shortcomings this Yom Kippur, let us also look for ways to give, so that we can create the better life we all envision during these sacred hours. Just like the man planting the tree, as we engage in Tzedakah and give more, we will find that our lives will become more filled with hope.

As Jews, we have many trademark values. As a people, we are known for our understanding of community, our respect for education, our emphasis on the family. We have given the world an understanding of responsibility, marked by our gathering here today. As Thomas Cahill wrote in his book a few years ago, we Jews have given the world many gifts, and these values stand out among our greatest gifts.

Another gift we Jews have given the world is Tzedakah, the value of giving. We could even say that the highest gift of the Jews is the gift itself. We who have survived millennia in exile understand the centrality and importance of Tzedakah. As we learn in the Tur, a great medieval code of Jewish law, "Tzedakah demands greater care and diligence than all of the positive commandments of the Torah." This building, and even more, the programs and learning that take

place within its walls illustrate our community's understanding of the importance of giving to others.

Even more than the gift of giving, we Jews have given the world an abiding sense of optimism. Through centuries of destruction, doom, despair, we have hoped, always dreaming of better times to come. Tikvah, hope, describes the outlook of the Jew better than almost any other word. It is no coincidence that Israel chose for its national anthem the poem entitled HaTikvah, the hope, for that poem in just a few short verses, describes the heart and soul of the Jew:

So long as still within the inmost heart
a Jewish spirit sings,
so long as the eye looks eastward,
gazing toward Zion,
Our hope is not lost—
that hope of two millennia to be a free people in our own land,
the land of Zion and Jerusalem.

So as we gather to do Tshuvah, to account for our thoughts and actions during the past year, let us turn to these values of Tzedakah and Tikvah, so that we can live the coming year with more giving and more hope.

This past year has been a challenging year for the values of hope and giving in Israel. And yet, even in these challenging times, Israel gives us an uplifting example of both giving and optimism.

During the summer, Israel gave the second largest gift of its history. Twenty five years ago, in return for hope and a promise to end hostility, Israel gave Egypt the Sinai Peninsula. The peace deal was heralded by some, despised by others. But now, a quarter of a century later, almost all agree that the gifts between Israel and Egypt have given stability and security to both countries and the entire region. Yes, problems remain. But overall, Israel's decision to give land and receive peace has produced rewards.

This summer, under the name of 'disengagement,' Israel again gave a gift of land. But this time, the gift came with no return promises. Instead, Israel gave control of Gaza, and in return received nothing more than hope. Considering the events of the past years, and the track record of the Palestinian people when it comes to self-government, Israel's actions seem foolhardy to some, scary to most. Yet, in giving Gaza, Israel exercised the very values which brought about the existence of the modern state.

The hope for a return to Eretz Yisrael permeated our people's prayers for nearly two thousand years of exile. When the 19th century spawned a new understanding of nationhood, the Zionist dream was renewed, and Jews all over the world began to give gifts to make the dream a reality.

Each gift and each gesture of support created hope in the Zionist cause. The land of Israel stands today as a testament to the power of giving and hope. Only a century ago, Eretz Yisrael was a dusty outpost, with sleepy villages filled with poverty. Today, the land is filled with people, ideas, trees, hope.

When Israel withdrew from Gaza, it did so with the hope that Gaza too could become someplace better, someplace at peace. In withdrawing from Gaza, and giving the land to the Palestinians, Israel was fulfilling the biblical command to be an 'Or L'Goyim' a light to the nations. Israel showed the world that even in the most difficult circumstances a nation and a people must find a way to give, a way to create hope instead of fear.

In withdrawing from Gaza, Israel made a statement steeped in the best of Jewish values. Israel showed that giving, even when excruciatingly painful, is still necessary. And Israel showed the world that at the end of the day, the Jewish heart beats with hope, not just for Jews, but for all of God's creation. Israel's gift of land came with the hope that the inhabitants of Gaza can create a place of tranquility and prosperity.

This past summer, I read a wonderful book about the power of giving during challenging times. The book, "Once Upon a Town" tells the story of an extraordinary small town in western Nebraska and its actions during World War II.

North Platte, Nebraska is very nearly in the middle of the country. During the age of railroads, North Platte was a hub of activity, with trains coming and going 24 hours a day. The flow of rail traffic grew significantly as soldiers and sailors were moved around the country by rail during the war.

So it was that the people of this small town, North Platte, decided to do something for all of the military people passing through. They decided to create a canteen, so that whenever a train arrived, the young men and women in uniform could get a free home-cooked meal or snack.

The people of North Platte followed through on the idea, and for more than four years met every single train of soldiers and sailors. Every day, every train that came to North Platte was met with baskets and tables of home-cooked food.

Soldiers and sailors on their way to or on their way home from far-off battles found a few minutes of warmth and hope in North Platte. The residents of that town, far removed from the battlefields, found a way to give; their gift gave hope to thousands of young Americans.

Friends, just as the people of North Platte illustrate, I believe that that Tzedakah and Tikvah, giving and hope, are related. I believe that when we give, we show hope in the future. A gift shows that we can move beyond our own self, and see that we can improve the entire world or the world of one person simply by giving.

As we look inward during these moments of Yom Kippur prayer, we can also look outward and decide to do for others. By turning our Tshuvah into Tzedakah and Tikvah, we illustrate the beauty of Tikkun Olam, the Jewish notion of improving the world. Our prayers can lead us to give. And in giving, we create hope both for ourselves and for others.

May we all be inscribed in the book of life, and may the New Year be one of giving and one of hope.