

**Yom Kippur 5775
October 4, 2014
Rabbi Adam Scheldt
Temple Beth Zion, Buffalo, NY**

Some time ago, after having lived in Buffalo for a full, robust and hearty 4 months or so, my neighbor gave me an invitation. She is a teacher, her school had organized their very first career day, and I was invited to speak to students about what its like to be a rabbi. I was delighted to take part. Not only did I have a chance to speak about something that I'm passionate about, but I was also given the opportunity to broaden the horizons of young people. Sure, I assumed that most of the kids I would be speaking to would probably not be Jewish, but I was fine with that. Speaking before non-Jews could only serve to open minds, and speaking before Jewish students might even help them feel some pride in their Jewish identity. And so on that rather chilly, rainy morning last fall, I got in my car and I drove to a place once known as the "synagogue-on-the-hill." I went to Bennett High School.

I was buzzed into the building, found my way through security, and quickly realized that, Bennett High was and is a distinctly inner-city school—complete with all the trappings of underprivileged education. Bennett has been and is plagued by a lack of attendance, a lack of student engagement, a lack in resources, and a serious lack of achievement. We hear about these things all the time in the news—and not just for Bennett High. But Bennett High's real problem is poverty. The lack of attendance, the lack of engagement, the lack of achievement, all these things are the trappings of true and deep poverty. Poverty, not just in terms of money, but also in terms of culture, and imagination.

As my turn came to speak to my assigned classroom, I rose, introduced myself, and before I could finish, one of the kids in the back shouted a question: "Are you rich?" I smiled and replied, "no." The boy's question reminded me that although my student loans suck up every dime I get my hands on, compared to the kids I was standing in front of, I have more than they could ever dream of.

Yes. Things could certainly be better. The segregation that plagues our beloved buffalo could dissolve and allow us to be one integrated community. The financial and intellectual poverty effecting thousands in western New York that insures the American Dream remains a dream instead of a reality could give way to success, stability, and enlightenment. And most importantly, the mouths that go unfed and the stomachs that perennially remain empty could be filled and satisfied. Things could be better.

There is almost too much to do. The problems I outlined seem so overwhelming and distant from our everyday lives that I'm sure many of the words I've spoken and the ideas I've expressed seem right, righteous, just--they make sense. But, because of that distance the problems I've outlined... you may not have truly taken them to heart.

So I'd like to share another story with you. This story isn't about an inner city school. It's not even about western New York. It is, however about a boy who grew up back in my native homeland of rural Illinois. He grew up on a farm, just like mine. And for the bulk of his formative years, he was poor. Very poor. He wasn't completely without. He had some toys, and he had his imagination. And it was the latter that, I think, really allowed him to capitalize on a huge crack that ran through the floor of the old basement that he lived in--pretending it was some sort of magical crack in the earth's crust from which all sort of imaginative things might come. It was his imagination that allowed him to believe that the blue painted cinder-block walls of his tiny bedroom were really walls of water surrounding his tiny undersea home. Though poor and often unhealthy, he never really knew that some of the food he ate came from a government commodity warehouse that subsidized and gave food to poor farmers.

Now many of you may have already figured out the punchline to this story. The little boy I described was me. I spent much of my childhood with cinder block walls. The crack in the basement floor was part of the floor of the original dugout basement home on my family's farm. I often think of my childhood as being idyllic and pastoral. And it was. I still would not trade it for anything. But looking back, it wasn't easy. We had the luxury of growing much of our food. Yes, I ate fresh vegetables, fruit, meat, jams, jellies, and yes, even donuts, that we produced on the farm, but I also ate government provided food. Because we needed it.

I was nearly in college when I learned that some people had jobs that didn't pay by the hour. Just like those kids over in Bennett high, I didn't know what a job with benefits was. I never went to a fancy grocery store like Wegmans. Sure, I looked different, but my own poverty wasn't so far off from those kids at Bennett High.

When you donate to a charity, when you bring food for a food pantry, sure, you might be helping people who aren't deserving, but you are also helping to enable and create a "me." I'm not trying to tell you how great I am, but as pompous as I am or am not, there's no denying, that I have come a very very long way from that basement with a cracked floor. We're I born in Buffalo, I would be a kid in Bennett high. I would have been on the receiving end of that career day.

So what do we do about this? We cannot create a new Eden in Buffalo. But, we can sure as hell try. And friends, we are going to start by getting hungry people some food.

The original idea came about years ago. It's been a project long in coming. We are going to open a food pantry. And we are going to do it by innovating and collaborating in ways that have never been seen before in the Jewish community of Western New York.

It's name is the Town Square Food Fair. It will be located adjacent to the Town Square facility at Weinberg campus. And it is opening this very November—not just for Jews, but for all who are hungry and in need in our area.

Never before has a Western New York Jewish organization reached out into the community like this. Never before has a synagogue in this half of the state been bold enough to establish meaningful, helpful, and ongoing outreach to the greater non-Jewish community in which we live. But the powerful innovation does not stop there. In order to celebrate all our strengths, and to make the greatest possible impact in an area so in need, we have partnered with Catholic Charities to make this food pantry a successful reality. Again, never before has a synagogue in western New York reached outside itself to fruitfully partner with outside organizations to literally change the reality of those in need. And still, the innovation doesn't stop. This isn't going to be a regular food pantry. We're calling it a food fair for a reason. It's going to be nice. Legitimately nice, with educative and nutritious ideas for how to cook the food that is available. All in a setting that is going to look more like a Wegmans than a barebones basement pantry. Jewish values and Jewish learning will be infused in all that we do and all that we provide. The dignity and total well-being of our shoppers, and yes, we are calling them shoppers, is paramount. They will have shopping carts, just like at a normal grocery store, but our food will be free for those who hunger.

This is amazing stuff. This is an amazing and exciting time to be in TBZ. We are so proud of our synagogue. We are so proud of our community. And now we have even more reason to be proud. Because each of us in this room have the opportunity to learn, to engage, and to help make the Town Square Food Fair a complete and heavenly success. Help will be needed on every front, and there will be room for each of us to take part. I am sure you have many questions about lies ahead there is so much that I could say. But I along with our lead organizers (who we will introduce in the weeks ahead), will be more than happy to answer each and every question and query you might have.

Friends, this Holiday season calls us to reach beyond ourselves. It calls us to heal the world as we would have our fractured selves healed. Our new food pantry is a chance to do exactly that. On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, but throughout the rest of the year, it is our task to create and enable wholeness where ever we can. And now, thanks to innovative and groundbreaking partnerships creating a truly beautiful opportunity all of us here in our TBZ family have the divine chance to create holiness where hunger now lives. If you are interested in helping in anyway, please, let us know by visiting the Social Action page on our website at tbz.org and filling out the tiny volunteer questionnaire. Again that's the social action page on our website. I not only look forward to working with all of you but more importantly I look forward to the holiness created amongst us all as we feed those in need and change the world together. You truly have my gratitude in advance for all that we will accomplish together. Shannah Tovah.