

A Debt of Gratitude

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Henry Paulson, the treasury secretary, should have read a thing or two about the Jewish High Holidays before proposing the big bailout plan.

It would have saved him some time. Who knows – maybe some money as well.

A little more than a week ago, as we celebrated Rosh Hashanah, we also marked the end of the biblical Sabbatical year—the *Shmitta* year. As many know, the Torah mandates that every seven years the land will lie fallow. It is not to be toiled; it is not to be worked.

The *Shmitta* year however also has a second, less known element that goes into effect upon its completion.

Essentially, at the end of the Sabbatical cycle, which falls on Rosh Hashanah, all personal debts are rendered null and void – they are considered canceled and forgiven.

Needless to say, this Halakhah or law became a major point of rabbinic dispute. For generations, commentators known for their love of controversy, and for their lack of bi-partisanship, argued over this rule's ramifications.

Null and void! Canceled? Abandoned? Really?!

For how long, and for whom?

What ever happened to personal accountability? And who will guarantee loans in the future?

Nowadays, we don't even need to read the original Jewish sources to understand what these questions are about. Open up any newspaper and you'll find Shammai disagreeing with Hillel, R. Akiva in dispute with R. Yishmael.

And yet, despite any seeming controversies and disagreements, the deeper message of ultimate forgiveness, of rendering – in this case, financial – promises null and void, is not restricted to the seven year cycle alone. In fact, this very message, albeit without its economic ramifications, is expressed yearly at the Kol Nidrei service.

“Kol Nidrei, Ve’Asarei, U’She’vuei, Va’chov’ramei...”

“All vows, promises, and oaths that we may have taken from last Yom Kippur to this Yom Kippur – they are all canceled, abandoned, rendered null and void.”

Once again, our sages struggle to explain –

For how long?

Under what circumstances

Is there no personal accountability?

Is this really a way to create a trusting society?

Consider for a moment the effects of the completion of the Sabbatical year and the audacious claims made by the Kol Nidrei service.

All debts—null and void! All personal promises, commitments, or vows—null and void! Now that’s a bailout!

Can you even imagine the size of this heavenly debt?

On this night, particularly at this time, I can’t help but raise the age-old question again: Is everything really forgiven? Are all debts really re-paid? All loans bought out? Is there anything still to be owed?

Rav Yisrael Zev Gustman, my own rabbi’s rabbi, lived in Vilna before the war. “When the Nazis came he escaped to the woods and joined up with a group of partisans. The Nazis would frequently dispatch troops into the thick Lithuanian woods to route out the rebels and Jews. Rav Gustman succeeded repeatedly in escaping detection by living among the thick

undergrowth.” (As told by Rabbi Lipman Podolsky, see <http://briskyeshiva.blogspot.com/2009/05/this-is-one-of-great-mizrachi-rabonin.html>) In this way, his life was saved.

Upon making Aliyah, Rav Gustman, despite his stature, and in later years, despite his old age, made it his habit to water the yeshiva’s plants. On occasion, Rav Gustman would explain that he felt forever indebted to the plants.

No *Kol Nidrei*, no *Shmitta* bailout, could ever release him from his debt of gratitude.

The Tzhurbiner Rebbe spent the war in Siberia. He was fortunate, blessed, to receive monthly care packages, delivered by the Red Cross, from an American Jew who recognized the rebbe’s name on a list of deportees. Years later the man, Moshe Veinfeld, published a note the Tzhurbiner Rebbe sent him upon his arrival to the land of Israel.

The note is short, brief, and to the point: “*Hayom hega’ati le’Haifa. Todah Al Hamazon Sheshalchta.*” “Today I arrived to Haifa. Thank you for the food packages you sent.”

On the very day of his arrival to the Land of Israel! Can we even imagine all the other competing needs, concerns, and worries, of that particular moment? And yet it seems that none could compare to the rebbe’s urgent sense of personal indebtedness.

No *Kol Nidrei*, no *Shmitta* bailout, could ever release him from his debt of gratitude.

Can gratitude ever be bought out?

The Jewish mitzvah of *Hakarat HaTov* – of recognizing goodness, and expressing thankfulness and gratitude for it, is unique among all other mitzvot. It transcends time and space. And while, all other debts can be forgiven or forgotten, a debt of gratitude is always owed.

Consider the origins of this mitzvah. The Israelites, upon entering the land of Israel, and after working its soil, and finally reaping its first fruits, were commanded to bring those very first fruits to the temple as a sign of gratitude and thanksgiving.

One would imagine that at that particular moment, the Jewish farmer would thank God for the conditions of the land, for the richness of its soil, for the abundance of the rain. That very moment seems so deeply seeded in the present tense, in the land of Israel at that very time, in those very first fruits.

Nevertheless, the Torah to our great surprise and dismay mandates for the Jewish farmer to recite the following words: “*Arami oved Avi*” – “An Aramean tried to destroy my life...but the Lord, God had saved me.” This particular sentence goes back in time and space, to a moment in our people’s history where Lavan the Aramean, Rebecca’s brother, tried to kill Jacob our forefather. Had Lavan succeeded, we are told, we, the Jewish people, would not be here today.

Here are my first fruits! I succeeded! Here is my diploma, my career! Here is the house I built! Here are the children I raised! Here is the community I helped build!

And yet... and yet... what am I grateful for? I am grateful that God saved my ancestors generations ago. I am grateful for something that happened – not at this time, not at this place – but in a different place, and in a different time long gone.

What is the theological significance, the mechanism behind this Jewish understanding of gratitude?

Gratitude, specifically being cognizant of things we are grateful for, and expressing gratitude for those things, on the one hand sustains our connection to the present tense, by challenging us to take note of all that is good in our lives today, and on the other hand, maintains our connection to the past, by challenging us to recognize that the good of today is forever indebted to the good of the past. Today’s fruits are forever bound to yesterday’s seed.

Gratitude begins in the present tense. But if it remains in the present tense then it will also remain incomplete. True religious gratitude will always lead us to the past. "*Hakarat Hatov*" transcends time and space.

The concept of giving gratitude is so central to our religious lives that it became the Jewish people's very namesake. *Yehudah* or *Yehudi*, which means, of Judah or Jewish, comes from the same root as the word *Todah* – to give thanks, to express gratitude.

In other words, to be a Jew is nothing more and nothing less than to lead a life of gratitude – one that is simultaneously focused on the present tense and rooted in the past. That is a debt from which we dare not become free – we owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our past.

This Yom Kippur, we have much to worry about. We worry about the economy, the elections, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. We also worry about *Medinat Yisrael*, its political instability, and the lack of security for its citizens. Most of all we worry about our life, our family, our community. And yet tonight, though we may feel overwhelmed by a sense of being judged, we dare to utter the words: "*She'hecheyanu ve'ki'yemanu ve'higyanu l'zman hazeh*" – "Blessed be God, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this very moment."

Sure this moment has its difficulties, its worries, its concerns, but as Jews we also know that our sense of gratitude goes beyond this time and beyond this place. Indeed, our debt for the things we are grateful for begins long before this present predicament.

The past allowed us to give thanks then, and the past will inspire us with confident faith that we will have occasion to give thanks again.

Tonight, let us institute a culture of gratitude in our midst; in our homes and in our shul, in our schools and in our places of work. The rabbis mandated for every Jew to recite one hundred blessings a day – one hundred opportunities to acknowledge gratefulness toward God. I believe that what is true in our relationship with God must be tested by our relationship with each other. If we thank God, but fail to thank each other... If we thank each other, but fail to

thank God... then our *Teshuvah*, our return to our shul, to our schools, to our offices, to our homes, will fall short.

People like sending each other Rosh Hashanah cards – those are nice, they're easy, they're fun and pleasing. A true religious community however is one that challenges itself, and all of its members, to send thank you cards to each other. A true religious community ought to inspire its members and participants to stop and reflect upon what it owes to itself and what it owes to the past.

This debt of gratitude, which we owe to each other, to our families and community, to the past and to God, this debt, may seem enormous and beyond our capacity. How can anyone ever account for the sheer goodness that has accumulated over so many generations? The goodness, which allows us to be here this very day?

While the debt is great and real, I believe that ultimately we share this debt with God himself. Our prophets comfort us:

“Zacharti lach chesed neuraiich” — “God will always remember the love of our youth, when we followed God in the desert wilderness.”

After thousands of years, God still feels indebted to our people. After thousands of years, God is still grateful for His relationship with us.

This Yom Kippur, I pray that our debt of gratitude will lead us from the present to the past, and from the past, with newfound strength, help us move into the future. May gratitude be our namesake forever and ever.