

Lessons From Ghana

Yom Kippur 5772 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer

The Mexican-American writer Luis Alberto Urrea once described a visit to a city in Texas, on the border with Mexico, where he was lodged in an elegant, high-rise hotel. At night, drink in hand in his fancy suite, he gazed out over the beautiful twinkling lights below. Then he realized that he was looking at shantytowns on the Mexican side, where workers earn a few dollars a day to make our garments, and where they live with the constant threat of violence, caused by the extreme economic disparity of the borderland. Urrea observed that many people would have viewed the place where he stood, and the place he was gazing upon, as two utterly different worlds. But, he noted, these are in fact two sides of the same coin: one world in which neither side is possible without the other.

This summer I had the opportunity to experience, up close and personal, this two-sided coin. I joined 15 other rabbis on a delegation to Ghana, on a service-learning trip hosted by the American Jewish World Service. I'd like to share a little bit about that trip with you this morning, and some insights and challenges that I brought back with me.

For 10 days our group of rabbis lived and worked in Sankor, a coastal fishing village a few hours from the capital, Accra. We were there to work with Challenging Heights, an organization founded by a man named James Kofi Annan. Like millions of other Ghanaians, James had been enslaved as a young boy, sold at the age of 6 to a fisherman. It is not uncommon for poor, uneducated Ghanaians, like James' parents, to feel that they are helping their child learn a trade, as well as relieving themselves of an economic burden, when they hand a child over to those who work in fishing boats or the cocoa fields. James was taken far from home, up to Lake Volta, where the fishing trade thrives on the labor of young children, whose small hands are needed to untangle fishing nets.

Many of these children - subjected to 17 hour-days of constant labor, malnourished, beaten, often sexually abused - do not survive. Of those who grow into adulthood, many decide, not surprisingly, that it's their turn to make good money as fishermen, and they continue the cycle of child slavery.

James was different. When he was 13, he managed to escape. He returned home and enrolled himself in school. Against many odds, he ultimately excelled as a student, and went on to university and a job as a bank manager.

After a year or so at Barclays Bank, James decided to return to his community and to help children suffering the fate that he had managed to escape. He created Challenging Heights, which is dedicated to combating child slavery and the conditions that give rise to it. Challenging Heights has set up shelters for rescued children, works with families and communities to educate them about the realities of child labor, and helps generate income-producing activities for impoverished families at risk of selling their children.

When our rabbinic group arrived this past July, we were taken to the school that Challenging Heights has built in James' home village of Sankor, where 400 children (including 100 former slaves) are receiving an education they might not otherwise get.

The school was built on land next to the house that James grew up in, and this house was where we stayed, alongside members of his extended family. With his earnings from his former job at Barclays Bank and grants from organizations like AJWS, James has been able to install running water and a couple of flush toilets in the compound, for use by the children and staff of the Challenging Heights school as well as by guests like us. James told us that for the rest of Sankor, with a population of about 500 people, there is one building with a few toilets, but you have to pay to use them, making it unaffordable for most people in the community. Clean running water used to be free, but apparently the government has begun charging for that as well in recent months.

So even though we rabbis were living far more simply than anything we're used to at home – sleeping 6 or 7 in a room on bunk beds, schlepping outside to use the two toilets, and taking showers by dumping water over our heads from buckets inside a small cement-walled enclosure – compared to the people in the community around us, we were pretty well off.

We had been asked to help with the construction of a building to house donated computers that would be arriving soon from Canada. Despite our lack of experience with mixing cement or laying bricks, we tried to make ourselves as useful as possible to the 5-man Ghanaian construction crew, who overall had enormous patience and good humor in dealing with us. We schlepped sand and bricks and rocks, fetched cement, and even tried our hand at spreading mortar.

Our work area would turn into a big playground when the children poured out of the school during their breaks, and we would become, as one of our group commented, "talking playground structures," as the children stroked our skin, climbed on us, asked us our names and how old we were, and generally made us feel like some combination of playmates and special guests.

In the afternoons, we'd gather to discuss our experiences, to learn about global poverty, and to try to integrate all that we were seeing and hearing. We wrestled with what exactly we were doing here. We surely couldn't be making much of a difference in terms of the actual building project – in fact, on most days it seemed that the workers made more progress once we were out of the way. Was this whole experience an elaborate charade to make us feel good about ourselves? Did the Ghanaians feel compelled to provide us with a work experience that didn't actually serve a purpose? Were we helping, or not?

During one of these discussions, I recalled a saying attributed to Lilla Watson, speaking for a group of aboriginal Australian activists:

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

According to this teaching, whether or not we were “helping” the community of Sankor was an irrelevant question – because “help” itself is sort of irrelevant. It might make the helper feel better about him or herself, but “help” can never solve much of anything.

Many of the children who came out to play with us asked us for water; kids in the neighborhood who saw us eating our meals would tell us they were hungry. Some of the kids in the schoolyard wore decent shoes; some ran and played in broken flip-flops. And you can be sure that each of us in the rabbinic delegation ached to “help” these kids. But is there any possible amount of “help” that would feed all these children, provide enough water, give them shoes, for their entire lives? And what about the millions of other poor children in Ghana? Across Africa? The entire mission of Challenging Heights—and the hundreds of other grassroots groups funded by the American Jewish World Service—is to go beyond “help.” It is to give children and their families an opportunity to have a decent life by means of education, community-building, and economic development.

So instead of thinking about how we were or weren’t “helping,” I began to think about how my “liberation” might be “bound up with” that of the men we were working alongside of, the children who played with us during their breaks, the women who ran the little shops along the road down to the sea.

But before I get to liberation, let me tell you about the goats. It was goat-birthing season in Ghana, and there were a few families of goats living in our compound. We’d see the baby goats hopping around during the day, and at some point we discovered that our dish-drying table doubled, at night, as a goat bed (a somewhat unappetizing fact that I wished I had remained ignorant of...). The goats helped eat our garbage, and I personally became convinced that at night they were discussing the debt ceiling showdown between the White House and the Congress. They were smart goats.

As we read in our Torah portion this morning, goats were also a common feature of ancient Israelite religion. On Yom Kippur, the most auspicious day of the year, the High Priest would be presented with two goats, and then entirely randomly – by choosing lots – he would designate one of these goats as a sacrifice, and send the other out to the wilderness, bearing the collective sins of the Israelite community.

In thinking about liberation, both my own and that of the people I was meeting in Ghana, I had to start with the fact that my being born a middle-class white American, and their being born impoverished Ghanaian villagers, was a happenstance as random as the designation of those two goats. I did nothing to deserve my fate, and they did nothing to deserve theirs. This is an important fact to acknowledge. We in America tend to believe that we’ve earned what we have, or that it’s ours by some kind of divine right. But nothing could be further from the truth. While I certainly work hard for my living, the folks I saw in Ghana work very hard too. Is it their fault that their labor earns them a few dollars a day, and mine earns hundreds? Is that anything more than the luck of the draw?

While each of the Yom Kippur goats had a different fate, they also each had their burden and their privilege. One goat was chosen “for Adonai,” which sounds auspicious indeed. But that goat was slaughtered and turned into a sacrifice. The other was chosen “for Azazel,” loaded up with the community’s sins, and let go in the wilderness. There in Ghana, I felt a bit like the Azazel goat. I was free in so many ways that the folks there were not: free of easily treatable diseases, free of poverty, free of having to marry at a young age, enjoying all the freedoms that an educated woman in the West can enjoy in the 21st century. And yet I also felt like I was bearing the collective sins of the entire developed world on my shoulders.

Sins of privilege, of having way too much stuff: the value of the clothes and equipment in my backpack was equal to an average Ghanaian’s yearly income. Sins of entitlement: the way I, like any good American, expected things to start on time, to work smoothly, to be ready for me when I wanted. Sins of blindness: how the entire time I was there I knew I would return home, back to my comfortable life, able to remember, or forget, in whatever way would suit me best.

One day in the middle of our visit we travelled to Cape Coast, to a former British colonial fort that had been a center of the slave trade in West Africa. There we toured the dungeons and holding cells where millions of captive Africans passed on their way to unspeakable degradation, torture, and death on the high seas and in the Americas. As we learned in the accompanying museum, none were innocent in this venture: Africans, Europeans, Americans, all played their part. After the tour, I felt ashamed to be a human being. But as an American, as someone whose immigrant ancestors were able to come to a land of opportunity largely built on the labor of enslaved Africans, I also bore the historic sins of my country.

Outside the fort, a young boy selling dried plantain chips asked us where we were from. I told him “America,” and he smiled and said “Obama-land!” He was very proud that the president and first lady had visited the fort a few years before. As he was talking to me, another girl, selling bags of drinking water, came up and tried to get my attention as well. She and the boy started arguing, and her basket slipped off her head, some of the bags falling to the ground and breaking. I felt horrible, feeling that I was the cause of this tussle, and now she had lost some of her earnings for the day. Sins of unintended consequences: how as an American I sometimes cause trouble, even when my intentions are good.

So here I am, the Azazel goat, set free, yet not free. I escaped the slaughter, thank goodness; but I am still connected to my brother goat on that altar. I bear my own sins, and those of my entire community – all of us standing high up on that balcony with Luis Urrea, gazing down on the shantytowns below. Knowing that my privilege, my comfort, depend in a very real way on the continued impoverishment, enslavement, and degradation of millions of people around the globe. I could not buy a shirt for \$20 without them. I couldn’t buy a bar of chocolate for a couple of dollars without them. I couldn’t sit in a Panera Cafe, where the food and the coffee and tea are so affordable, and have written this sermon, without them. I couldn’t afford a car, or a computer, or pretty much anything, without them.

Yet thinking about it that way, it would appear that my liberation is actually contingent upon the non-liberation of others. There is an entire class of people upon whom my wellbeing depends; why would I ever want to give that up?

And this was the real learning of my time in Ghana. I knew before the trip that extreme poverty existed all over the world. I was aware that I, and most of us in this room, are within the top 1% of the entire world's population in terms of income (all it takes is a household income of at least \$48,000). And I knew that something needed to be done about it; that resources need to be redistributed, better allocated, more fairly shared. And I thought it was a fairly simple calculation – take from those of us who have too much, and give to those who have too little. I'd make do with a little less, or maybe a lot less, so that others can enjoy their fair share. Painful, maybe, but necessary.

But what I learned in Ghana is that this redistribution is not only for the sake of those in need; it is for my – for our – sake, as well. Because part of the two-sided coin described by Luis Urrea is a profound imbalance of “too much” and “not enough,” two extremes that cause suffering on both sides. What they have too little of, we often have too much of; sometimes they have what we need, even while we have what they need.¹

What I saw in Ghana was that many people don't have enough food. We didn't see outright starvation during our time in Sankor, but it was clear that people there eat much less, and much more simply, than we do. A lot of the kids we met were hungry, and hunger is an enormous problem throughout the Global South, and a growing problem in the U.S. as well. Yet for middle class and upper middle class Americans, we don't just have enough food; we have way too much. In Ghana, we enjoyed three hot meals every day prepared for us by a lovely man named Charles who was a very good cook. They were simple meals, usually rice and a vegetable stew, plus a mid-morning snack. I was aware that I was eating much less than I was used to, and that I mostly felt a lot better, physically, than I usually do. Clearly we had something to learn about what is “enough” when it comes to eating.

In America, we have too many choices in our grocery stores; too many cooking shows on TV; a kind of national obsession with food that has made us simultaneously malnourished and overfed. While most of the world goes hungry, millions of Americans spend enormous amounts of time and money trying to eat less. Hunger in Ghana, obesity in America – liberation lies somewhere in between.

The same could be said about hygiene. While the people I saw in Ghana bathed and washed their clothes daily, it's clear that the standards of hygiene weren't what we're used to in the States. A lack of purified water to drink, and no trash collection, so garbage gets burned and the stench hangs in the air. Children die of easily treatable diseases. A lack of indoor plumbing means open sewage. A definite deficit of hygiene. Yet here in America we seemingly have too much. Our kids are kept so far from microbes that many do not develop adequate immune systems. We so overuse antibiotics that we've developed

¹ Thanks to my colleague on the trip, Rabbi Anne Ebersman, for this insight about each having what the others need, so eloquently expressed in her d'var Torah on *Ki Tavo*, September 2011.

strains of super-bacteria, and killed off much of the good bacteria that we need in our digestive systems. Open sewage in Ghana, too much hygiene in America – liberation lies somewhere in between.

Personal space and privacy: Ghana has a warm climate, and people have simple homes and do a lot of things outdoors, in the open. Many people live in small spaces; adults and kids bathe relatively openly. Our whole American notion of “personal space” was definitely not in operation.

I thought about that sense of personal space, and how so often here we have too much of it. We live in ever-bigger houses, holed up in our own rooms. Very often we don’t know our neighbors. In my suburban neighborhood, even carpools are too communal; everyone drives on their own. There is a richness of community and interpersonal connection that was evident in Ghana that is missing for millions of Americans. Too little privacy in Ghana, too much personal space in America – liberation lies somewhere in between.

The shared liberation for me, for the people I met in Ghana, for people all over the world, is a liberation of balance, of figuring out what indeed is “enough.” Enough food—not too little, or too much. Enough stuff—not too little, not too much. Enough housing, enough clothing, enough access to the Internet, enough privacy and enough social connection. Because the two-sided coin we live in, with extreme deprivation on one side and obscene abundance on the other, is not a sustainable coin. It’s a coin that purchases a super-sized portion of human suffering. It’s a coin that is buying us a one-way ticket to environmental disaster. It’s a problem coin for everyone involved.

In this morning’s Torah portion, the High Priest performs a ritual to atone for the sins of concentric rings of people with whom he is in relationship, to whom he is obligated. With the Yom Kippur sacrificial offerings, he “makes atonement for himself, and for his household, and for the whole community of Israel.”

When I think about my experiences in Ghana, and contemplate how I might act on the lessons that I learned there, I find this model of concentric circles a useful one. I too live within ever-more-inclusive circles of connection and obligation. Myself, my family, my community, my country, and ultimately, all those with whom I share this planet.

Every day when I went to the work site at Challenging Heights, a little girl named Rebecca would come find me. Why she singled me out, I have no idea. She was about 6 years old, a beautiful, sweet little girl. I don’t think she knew more than a few words of English, and my own attempts at learning Fanti, the local language, were pretty pitiful. But she didn’t really want to talk, or to play, like a lot of the other kids. She just wanted me to pick her up and hold her. I don’t know anything about her or her life, except that to be at that school, her family was poor, at risk of selling a child into slavery. Was she neglected? Not given enough attention? I have no idea. She didn’t tell me, and she didn’t ask anything of me, either, except to be held. And now I have a connection to little Rebecca. I feel some responsibility to her, even though I may never see her again. She is now part of my

concentric circles. As are all those children in Sankor, and their families, and the people of that community.

Whether or not we ever meet the people around the globe upon whom our lives depend, all of us are bound up in concentric circles of connection and responsibility. Because, as Luis Urrea noted, we are implicated in one another's lives, for better or for worse. Because, as I learned at the slave castle in Cape Coast, our histories are intertwined. Because we inhabit one global economy, one biosphere, one vast intricate web of "too much" and "not enough."

It's Yom Kippur, and today we think about our responsibilities. What can we do better? Where can we make a difference? As we learned from the prophet Isaiah, our fast is not a true fast if we are not confronting issues of justice and injustice. And as I suggested earlier, when we're confronting poverty and hunger either here in the U.S. or halfway around the world, our challenge isn't to "help." Our challenge is to figure out how things need to be different, and then do something to make a difference.

That is what is most remarkable to me about James Kofi Annan, the founder of Challenging Heights. He understood, by the age of 13, that he did not want to become a part of a system that had so brutally oppressed him. He did not want to become one more fisherman making a good living, enslaving little children in order to sustain himself. Like James, I do not want to pretend that I am free when others are still enslaved. I must do everything I can to change a system in which I benefit from the oppression of others. And I need to do this in my own self-interest, as the center of my own little ring of concentric circles of connection and obligation.

How do we make that change? How do we act for our own liberation, bound up with the liberation of others? That's a question that I will continue to wrestle with, and that I invite you to wrestle with, in this new year.

Maybe it means that we have to look at our own consumption habits, to see where we are on the scale of "enough," and make changes if necessary.

Maybe it means joining with folks camping out in downtown Boston, the demonstrators who are representing the "99%" – those of us who, while perhaps in the top 1% of the income-earners in the world, are in the bottom 99% here in America, below the 1% of the super-wealthy who are increasingly controlling and warping our economy and our democracy.

Maybe it means taking Jewish teachings about tzedakah seriously, and making a commitment to give away 10-20% of our income every year to those who are in need, to organizations working for social and economic justice.

To do a bit of this wrestling together, I invite you to join me and CDT member Jonathan Rosenthal for a class, beginning in November, where we'll explore teachings from Jewish texts and from Jonathan's experience in the world of fair trade to help us understand what it means to work for our own and others' liberation. We'll look at Jewish teachings about

wealth and poverty, learn about the ways in which people all over the globe are trying to make real change in how their lives are lived, and see what concrete steps each of us might take in this larger project of liberation.

I also encourage you to go to the website of American Jewish World Service, www.ajws.org, to learn about the many organizations they are supporting all over the world, and the service-learning opportunities they provide for high school and college students, as well as adults.

May we all, in this new year, come a little bit closer to an understanding of what it means to live in a world where all are free, where all can enjoy “enough” of the blessings and abundance that the world offers us. May we each do what we can to care for those within the circles of our connection and obligation, and may we all receive the care that we need. May we move the world just a little closer in the year to come to a place of healing and balance for all citizens of this globe. So may it be written, and sealed, for good.