

## **STEALING FROM GOD AND FROM OUR NEIGHBORS PARASHAT NASO – KOL EMETH JUNE 6, 2008**

Among other beautiful things, Parashat Naso brings us this intriguing piece of text: "God spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites: When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow person and commits theft from God, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess the wrong that he has done. He shall make restitution . . ." (Numbers 5:5-7) Commentators and translators alike have struggled to understand the connection between "*mikol hatot*/commits any wrong" and "commits theft from God/*lim'ol ma'al*." On the one hand, the language "commits any wrong" and the remedy – confession and restitution – suggest that what we have here is a general description of sin and teshuva. On the other hand, why would the Torah bring us a central teaching on teshuva in the context of the very specific sin of stealing from the sacred precinct? This piece of Torah pulsates with meaning for me, in the aftermath of a day my children and I spent in Postville, Iowa, witnessing first-hand great wrongs – and perhaps great theft – perpetrated against the workers of the Agriprocessors plant.

First, a bit of history. In 2003, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals began documenting horrific accounts of cruelty to animals, inconsistent with the spirit if not the law of kashrut, at the Agriprocessors plant. Many thought this could not be; perhaps this was the work of people who wished to discredit the whole system of kashrut. In 2006, after the Forward published a scathing expose of worker abuse at the plant, my colleague Rabbi Morris Allen resolved to conduct a quiet and thorough investigation, doing his own study of the plant, and repeatedly inviting the plants' owners to respond and make the needed changes. When they failed to do so, the Hekhsher Tzedek initiative was born, seeking to create a national mechanism whereby the Conservative Movement would work with producers of kosher food that already received Orthodox kashrut certification to evaluate their businesses' ethical standards in terms of treatment of workers and corporate management practices.

On May 12<sup>th</sup> of this year, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials rounded up nearly all of the employees at the Agriprocessors plant and arrested 394 undocumented workers. For the very first time, instead of deporting the undocumented immigrants, the government chose to prosecute these people on the federal felony of identity theft and then imprisoned them for a period of five months, leaving women behind to care for their children. The women were required to wear GPS monitors on their legs to ensure that they could neither work nor leave the area. After incarceration, the husbands, along with their children, would be immediately deported, and the mothers would then serve their own five-month sentences. With felony convictions on their records, these people would never be eligible to enter the U.S. again. A call went out for rabbis in Minneapolis/St. Paul, the largest

Jewish community in the vicinity of Postville, to travel to the town to listen to the workers, to convey a supportive Jewish presence, and to show the aggrieved people a different face of Judaism than they have come to know. My daughter speaks Spanish, and so I invited my three college-age children to come with me. I could not have anticipated the profound impact the journey would have on us. What we encountered in Postville, Iowa was a confluence of two dismal situations, both of them tragic and shameful: (1) systematic abuse of workers by owners and managers of the Agriprocessors plant, which supplies 40% of all poultry and 60% of all kosher meat in the U.S. and (2) the human face of our government's distorted and dysfunctional immigration policy. We met with three union organizers, one leader of the Hispanic community in Postville, and three families who agreed to allow us into their homes to tell us about their experiences. A remarkably consistent pattern of stories emerged from the people we met, parallel to information in the affidavits filed by government agencies. (We were told that 16 federal agencies are investigating this plant, including not only ICE but OSHA, USDA, IRS, and the FBI.) We learned that workers were regularly paid a lower hourly wage than had been promised to them, and rarely paid for the overtime hours (including 12-14 hour shifts) that they frequently worked. We were told that bathroom breaks were inadequate and accompanied by harassment by supervisors, and that the workers' cafeteria was in an unsanitary condition. Workers were regularly forced to pay for their own uniforms, counter to U.S. labor law. Serious accidents were common, including lost limbs. There was no on-site medical care, and workers were discouraged from seeking medical care. When necessary, the company doctor performed procedures in his office that should never have been attempted outside of a hospital then rushed the injured worker back to work. The list of abuses grew more and more chilling. There was a regular pattern of managers extorting money from the impoverished immigrants, by insisting that a worker buy a car on credit from the manager as a condition of employment, creating a kind of indentured servitude. Managers regularly humiliated workers and occasionally struck them. We were told that sexual favors were demanded of female workers, in exchange for work or better work assignments, and we learned that from 40-80 teenagers, age 14-16, worked illegally in the plant, facilitated by a business partner of the plant's owner. We were told that "everyone knew" of the rampant abuses, yet workers who dared to approach the owners to report on abuses at the plant were fired. An atmosphere of intense fear, harassment, and dehumanization prevailed. It was clear that the company had knowingly recruited undocumented workers for many years, as we saw copies of Spanish-

language ads placed in Mexican and Guatemalan newspapers. At some point, managers aggressively urged the workers to obtain fake Social Security cards (for which the workers are now serving time in prison), actively facilitating the distribution of the illegal papers. Thus the immigrants and the company shared culpability for the workers' illegal employment, but only the workers were prosecuted. The people we spoke with were kind, dignified and completely credible. But even if only half of what we heard was true, gross abuses were committed. A few moments were burned into my memory. A leader of the Hispanic community in Postville described for us the way in which the treatment of workers deteriorated in 1999-2000, with work conditions becoming increasingly difficult, harassment increasing, and the company exerting pressure on the immigrants to obtain false identity papers. For a moment, the narrative sounded biblical to me, an echo of the tale of the Egyptians' increasingly oppressive treatment of their workers – our ancestors, the Israelites. I remember Marta, who responded to our questions with terse, respectful answers, covering over a powerful sense of despair. All the while, her hand alternately massaged the part of her lower leg where the electronic monitor was attached and carefully readjusted her skirt to cover the monitor, as if its presence was a source of humiliation. A young mother named Maria told us that she has no idea where her husband is, except that he is in a prison somewhere in Iowa. She had no idea where she and her 3-year old son would go at the end of the month (two days after our visit), when she would be unable to pay her rent. Our last visit was to the home of Elida, a woman of beauty and dignity. She let out a deep sigh when we asked her to tell us about her experience. Like a poet or playwright pondering how to tell a tragic story, she said slowly, "I have no idea how to tell you what this has been like." She agonized over how to respond to her children's questions about where their daddy has gone. One of her children – a strikingly beautiful little girl – wandered in and snuggled with her mother, wondering about the presence of strangers in their living room. I am a person who believes deeply in the power of human presence, the great potential of one person listening to another in times of pain. Yet sitting in the homes of these lovely people, who had suffered indignity while laboring to produce the meat that my family and I had enjoyed, and who now faced desperate circumstances, my offer of compassionate listening felt profoundly inadequate. Toward the end of each of the home visits, I experienced just one satisfying, even redemptive moment. Before bidding farewell to each family, I spoke for the group by identifying myself as a rabbi, and describing our group as representatives of the Jewish community, saying, "I want to tell you that I

am ashamed of what has been done to you to help me live my religious life. And I am ashamed of what my government has done to you." It was a tiny part of the teshuva process – a public acknowledgement of shame and remorse for actions for which I know that I have been indirectly responsible. By far, the bright light of our visit to Postville was our time at St. Bridget's Catholic Church. This small-town church had had an outreach program to the Hispanic population prior to the raid, so it was here that the workers sought refuge after the raid. Upon entering the church, it was instantly clear that this was a holy place. There were many people in the church's simple sanctuary: some alone in prayer, small groups in quiet conversation, others bathing in the sense of safety and caring this place offered. The church, under the leadership of Sister Mary McCauley and two priests, had transformed itself into a full-service social service agency, providing food, counseling, and assistance with immigration, housing and financial issues. Professional and volunteer staff hurried around the church, offering support, seeking to respond to the many dimensions of the crisis each family faced. Sister Mary spoke to us plainly and starkly about the stories she had heard, about the process of gaining the trust of traumatized people, and about the enormous challenges they faced. She estimated that the church would need \$700,000 to keep the families fed and sheltered until the end of the period of incarceration, and she spoke with gratitude about the support of the Jewish and Lutheran communities. I wrote her a large check, thanked God for her work and prayed for her success. God's presence was as palpably present in that place as it felt painfully absent elsewhere in Postville. On the way out of Postville, I asked my children what they were thinking and feeling. They responded resoundingly: we cannot talk about it right now. I thought of the kind of shocked silence groups often fall into after visiting places where atrocities have been committed, as if the soul needs quiet time to absorb the horror it has seen. After an hour or two, the kids began to speak of their questions and observations: "Now we know why the meat from this plant was less expensive – it's because the workers weren't being paid fairly!" "It seems like the wrong people are in prison!" "The dynamics of globalization are unfolding right in our back yard!" "Who is going to keep the pressure on to be sure the people responsible are brought to justice?" And we talked about what to do now. We all knew that we would not consume meat from this plant until these issues were resolved. My daughter, soon to leave for the Mexican border for a semester studying issues of immigration, poverty, and human rights, knew that she would soon be confronted with many more such horrors. Our older son, just back from a semester in South Africa, felt deeply the injustice of a dysfunctional

immigration policy and a national blindness to the realities of the people living south of our border. Our younger son, on his way into journalism school, mused about the power of the media to keep the story alive, to be sure the government investigations would be brought to a just conclusion. We all wondered how we, each of us in our own way, could be part of the educational challenge now standing before the Jewish community, to insist that it would be better to consume no meat at all, or to pay substantially higher prices, than to continue our complicity with a system by which we depend on the abuse of workers for the performance of our mitzvot. In the days following our visit, the experience was as fresh as ever. One son published a letter to the editor in the New York Times about his experience; another, a staff member at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, engaged the camp director in conversation about how to teach issues of kashrut, worker rights and immigration to campers this summer. Gradually, we discerned three necessary levels of action in response to what we had seen. (1) A humanitarian crisis is unfolding in Postville. Unlike the distant relationship we might have to families affected by a natural disaster across the globe, the Jewish community itself was complicit in the suffering of these families, since we continued to buy kosher meat and support Jewish institutions' relationship with this company long after we knew that serious allegations had been made. St. Bridget's Church estimates that it needs \$700,000 to care for the affected families. Not only are we obligated to contribute to their care as an act of tzedaka. As my husband told our synagogue community, before we give gifts for the care of the workers, we must first literally repay our debt to them, since we now know that the low prices we have paid over the years for our kosher meat are a direct result of the wages denied these workers. Contact information for donations appears below. (2) Reuniting Kashrut with Justice

Until we know that the plant has corrected the many wrongs inflicted on the workers, the meat and poultry from this plant cannot be considered to be kosher in any but the most narrow sense. The Conservative Movement has advised its members to "to evaluate whether it is appropriate to consume Rubashkin products until this situation is addressed" and the Hekhsher Tzedek initiative is moving forward in its plan to supplement traditional kashrut supervision with certification of a producer's employment practices, including wages and benefits, health and safety, environmental impact, and corporate transparency.

Uri L'Tzedek, an initiative of students at the Orthodox rabbinical seminary Yeshivat Hovevei Torah, has called for an outright boycott of Agriprocessors, and is organizing both local and national leaders to restore ethics to the processing and distribution of kosher food. Jewish leaders are urged to work with local sellers and distributors of kosher meat and poultry to reject Agriprocessors products, sold under the names "Aaron's," "Aaron's

Best," "Best," "Shor Habor," "Supreme," and "Nathan's," until the word "kosher" can once again be associated with ethics, with holiness, with "answering to a higher authority." (3)Immigration Reform is a Jewish issue. Good-hearted people can surely disagree about exactly what must be done to repair our nation's broken immigration system. But one thing is certain: pleading ignorance to the injustices that are committed against immigrant workers to support our familiar ways of eating is no longer an option. The veil has been lifted, and we now know clearly (as many had warned before) that consumption that we consider a normal feature of our life as Americans and as American Jews is intimately related to desperate poverty in Central and South America and to American trade and immigration policy. Thus immigration reform is a Jewish issue, a humanitarian issue, an urgent advocacy issue for all thoughtful Americans. We have not accepted "We didn't know" or even "We didn't know what to do" as an excuse when it has been used by those who acted against us. The Torah calls to us with painful clarity, "*Al ta'amod al dam rei'echa*," "Do not stand idly by as your neighbor's blood is shed." Finally, a return to the question with which we began. How are we to understand the verses in Parashat Naso that ground the system of teshuva/sin and repentance in the crime of "theft against God"? The Sefat Emet teaches, ". . . the mitzvah of teshuva is based on the verse, 'They will confess their sin.' (Numbers 5:7) But this verse is written in connection with theft. Every transgression, he taught, is a sort of theft. One who restores everything to God, the source of life, recognizes God's mastery over all Creation. Such a person surely will be free from sin." Whatever you think of what you have read and heard, regardless of where you stand on the spectrum of the immigration debate in this country, know this. Over three hundred people who crossed the border to find work in this country, despairing of being able to provide for their families' most basic needs in their home countries, now sit in prison, their wives and children left behind in fear, confusion, and desperation. Know too: many serious offenses were committed against the undocumented workers of the Agriprocessors plant, and these crimes amount to theft on a very large scale: "*lim'ol ma'al baShem*" – stealing from that which belongs to God. Stealing from vulnerable people not only the wages that by any standard of decency belonged to them but also their hope, their dignity, and their freedom. Stealing from the good name of the Jewish community in the eyes of the aggrieved people and in the eyes of every American who has now read these dreadful stories. Robbing God of dignity, as the whole world now knows what has been done in the name of a very narrow version of the mitzvah of

kashrut, a very narrow vision of Torah. Once we could claim we did not know, but no longer. These acts of theft were committed in our names. We are complicit and so we are responsible. The Torah calls out for verbal confession of sins and restitution to those who are wronged. The call for teshuva here applies not only to the direct perpetrators, but to all of us who literally ate the fruits of their sins. May we be guided to restore that which was taken from impoverished people who labored so that we could feast. And may we – by our acts of tzedaka and advocacy - help to heal the ways in which God's name has been desecrated in our names.

Donations to provide basic services to the affected families can be made to the following: St. Bridget's Hispanic Fund, P.O. Box 369, Postville, IA 52162, in care of Sister Mary McCauley Jewish Community Action/ATTN Postville, 2375 University Avenue West, Suite 150, St. Paul, MN 55114 Phone 651/632-2184 Fax 651/632-2184.