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Isaiah, the Ice Bucket, and the *Shmittah* Year

I wonder what Isaiah would say about the Ice Bucket Challenge.

Over the past two months, a remarkable outburst of giving has been taking place, called the Ice Bucket Challenge. About 3 million people have given over \$100 million toward research about ALS – Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. Someone challenges another person to do one of two things: to pour a bucket of ice water over their head, or to contribute \$100. Many people have been doing both, and YouTube is full of videos of ice water dousings.

The ALS Association, as has been widely reported, had raised less than \$3 million during the previous year, and now suddenly there is this \$100 million. Hundreds of thousands of people who have never contributed to this cause have taken action.

This is, as I say, a remarkable outpouring of giving. And it's also a fascinating window into giving itself, and why people give.

Most reports trace the Ice Bucket Challenge this summer to Peter Frates, a baseball player like Lou Gehrig. He had been team captain at Boston College and was diagnosed with ALS two and a half years ago. Peter had been a communications major in college, and on the day he was diagnosed he articulated a vision of bringing ALS to the attention of major philanthropists, to work on a cure. He is a person of great hope. Though he can no longer speak or walk, Peter and his wife Julie celebrated the birth of a daughter

just last month.

But the story of this summer's Ice Bucket Challenge goes farther back. There were college basketball players doing it to raise money for cancer research. I've seen reports about golf players – no offense – challenging each other to dump ice water over their heads just to do it!

People have been pouring water over themselves this summer to raise money for Africa, for cancer research, for ALS research, and for no reason at all. And you know that people in all kinds of organizations, are wondering what they can do to replicate this. Don't worry – I'm not about to ask you to pour Manishevitz over your heads, or to crumble matzah in your hair for the Temple. Instead, I want to use this interesting summer of giving to help us *think* about giving. Already, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge is slowing down and fading from our attention – fewer videos, fewer views and tweets, fewer hits on the ALS website. But there's a lot to notice and to learn. I wonder what Isaiah would say.

He might notice that the Ice Bucket Challenge reveals a readiness to give, an untapped generosity. It's too soon to know for sure, but it looks like the donations for ALS were new money, not just money that would have been given for another cause that called on the phone or knocked on the door, that arrived in the mail or spoke on the radio. How much more wealth is untapped, waiting to be given?

This summer wasn't the first time in recent memory when we have seen such generous giving all of a sudden. After the Boston Marathon bombing last year, the One Boston Fund raised more than \$70 million, from far fewer people. After 9/11, after Hurricane Katrina, billions were raised.

But what is unique about the ALS giving, is that it has not been a response to a sudden catastrophe. It's not sparked by images of mass devastation, but by video of people having fun. It's not for something immediate – to feed a family or rebuild a house -- but for something that might take a long time to become real, a cure for ALS. It's giving from hope and enjoyment, not from anger or helplessness.

There are all kinds of motives behind the Ice Bucket gifts and videos. Isaiah talks about the fact that people want to be seen in Sanctuaries, beating their chests in piety while getting ready for economic business as usual the day after the holy day. He would surely pick up on the fact there's more going on in the Ice Bucket Challenge than just giving and caring. There's the cachet of making a great YouTube video, of being associated with celebrities, of one-upping your friends, and just generally of being seen doing something good.

These may not be the deepest motivations, but they sure got the job done. In Judaism, the rabbis of the Talmud talk about there being two forces inside us for our actions. There is the built-in force for good, called the *yetzer hatov*, and the built-in force of bad, of selfishness, called the *yetzer hara*. The rabbis of the Talmud were not prophets, and they were not purists. They believed that often it's the *yetzer hara* that really powers us. Competition and recognition can be pretty powerful motivators. If we do something good out of those, it's still good, and it's a great start.

There's a word floating out there about the Ice Bucket Challenge that Isaiah might have appreciated. It has a kind of prophetic edge to it. The word is: *slactivism*.

Slactivism. It's a great new coinage: activism slacker-style. Here we've had this one-

off, easy thing. You just go out in the backyard, turn on your computer, film, click a donate button. That's all you had to do. How many of the new givers will give again to the ALS Association? How many will think about what they were giving, or why they were giving, or what they will donate to next?

\$100 million dollars of new giving, during a summer of war in Ukraine, war in Israel and Gaza, war in Iraq and Syria -- this is nothing to sneeze at. We give money because it's something we *can do*, a way to channel our urge to fix the world when other avenues are blocked. But Isaiah would ask us: How do we go from giving when it strikes us, to becoming givers in a more profound way? How do we not just wait for the next *tzedakah* thing that goes viral to get our attention?

Well as it happens, some of the answer is waiting for us this year, in the very fact of the Jewish year of 5775. This year is what is known in Jewish law as *Shmittah*, the year of release, and also *Shvi'it* or *Shabbaton*, the sabbatical year.

In the Torah, every seventh year the Land of Israel is supposed to rest. No planting of crops, and no harvest – not of grain, or fruit, or grapes or olives. Whatever grows is available for everyone to eat. The land, all the potential income for the year and all the accumulated personal wealth it represents, is released – it belongs to everyone.

During the *Shmittah* year, if anyone owes money to another person, that debt is cancelled. Anyone impoverished by debt is released from that burden, so they can start over fresh.

Just after the *Shmittah* year ends, during the Sukkot festival the following fall, the whole nation gathers in Jerusalem to hear the Torah read out to them. That was the original

public Torah reading ritual.

You may not have ever heard of this, and if so this is a lot to try to imagine and digest. We're not sure whether our ancestors really turned into hunter-gatherers every seven years and shut off the financial system. There are some workarounds that were built by the Talmud. But people are already doing a lot, especially in Israel, with the idea of *Shmittah*.

For instance, Dr. Ruth Calderon is a member of the Knesset and a teacher of Talmud to secular Israelis. She is starting a fund that would help Israelis get rid of debt – they would commit to paying part, the bank would forgive part, and the new fund which will open in November will pay the rest. In the U.S., a group that's an offshoot of the Occupy Wall Street has purchased \$18 billion of bad debt in the financial market so that it can refuse to collect.

I want to spell out the principles of the *Shmittah* year, because they can help us unlock our generosity, in ways that are more long-lasting than the Ice Bucket Challenge.

Shmittah is the year when we notice just how much we have accumulated already in the other years. The Torah says that we can eat without planting, because the harvests before now have been bountiful, and we have been able to store up. Not everyone individually, necessarily, but collectively as a society. There is enough already here in our hands, so that when the fields are bare, everyone who has a storehouse opens it up and those who don't come and they eat together.

For 14% of the time, the energy that would go into making more and earning more, goes into seeing how much we can do for society with what we already have.

Shmittah flips the usual way we think about giving on its head. Generally, we make money and we ask, “How much shall I give?” But in a year when no one accumulates anything new, you would notice what you really needed to live on. Then the next year you could easily see the surplus and say, “Here's how much I don't need – from this point on I can give.”

Shmittah asks us to take stock of the world we're living in, before we go on to generate more and more things. Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb asks, “What if every seventh year, professionals just wrap up loose ends of work projects, and dedicate most of their talent and time to the greater good?”

Shmittah profoundly changes the relationship between those who have had a lot and those who have not. For a year, everyone who goes out to find food in the field finds it the same way.

In a regular year, a poor person waits to see what is left in the corners of the field, or what has fallen to the ground. During *Shmittah*, everyone walks together. It's true – you know that this is so-and-so's field, and you see the commerce there and all the benefits of ownership. But after a while of being in so-and-so's field and just gleaning, together, the distinction fades into the background. The owner and the other can start to see each other as more than just representatives of different economic classes.

This *Shmittah* year can be a time when we think about all of this. When we notice how much we have stored up as a society; when we walk together with those we usually think of as separate and needing our “help”; when we ask what we need to keep, rather than what we should give; when we stay focused on the lingering issues in society,

rather than running toward the next new thing we might have in our world.

Tracy Gary, the author of a terrific book called *Inspired Philanthropy*, observes that most giving in the United States is essentially Ice Bucket giving. It's social, it's spur of the moment – it's not considered and planned, purposeful. There is a place for it, and for the good energy it generates. But this *Shmittah* year can be a time when we think about our giving differently, more deeply – in a way that can also be more satisfying.

I want to offer you a couple of the many possible ways we could do that together.

One is by learning together how to develop a thoughtful giving plan for yourself. One that translates your values and passions into giving, and helps you see how your giving turns into the changes you want to see in our world.

Our seventh graders learn this every year as part of the curriculum with me, though the Beth Abraham Seventh Grade Tzedakah Fund. With several hundred dollars as a fund, they go through a process of discussing their values and concerns, creating a *tzedakah* mission statement, learning the different ways organizations go about changing the world, studying Jewish texts about giving, and challenging each other to come up with the best way to give out the money in the fund. For something as a group they can say they collectively care about, in a way that will get a result.

Over the years, they have given many thoughtful gifts. To organizations like the Anne-Marie House, which helps families in Greater Nashua move from homelessness to self-sufficiency. Or the Solar Sisters, which helps African women become independent businesswomen selling portable solar technology to bring light and power to isolated villages. This year, one or two of our alums is going to help me teach the next

generation and pass this learning along!

Six years ago, when I spoke about this on Yom Kippur, I invited any group in the synagogue to create a giving circle, starting with \$500 from my Rabbi's Discretionary Fund.

Out of that initial invitation came the Jewish Women's Giving Circle, which has continued to meet regularly and explore how to support mothers and children facing challenges in our community. It's been a long and fascinating process of learning, of following one path and then another, dealing with satisfactions and frustrations of working in the real world to do good and participate in change. I renew that offer of seed funding to anyone else who would like to launch a group, another Jewish giving circle in our community.

And if you're not sure about that kind of open-ended group commitment, we can come together to study the process of developing a personal giving plan. As it happens, this week a new, free online course is beginning through Stanford University, called Giving 2.0. We could take it together and form our own Jewish study group, and complete the first version of our own giving plans before Chanuka and the end of the tax year.

I am convinced -- that giving that comes from what you care about deep down, from conversation and research, and from a knowledge of how to judge what you're doing -- that kind of giving is not only more satisfying, but creates an urge to give that only increases.

If you're ready to walk with someone in our community who is on a personal road from poverty to self-sufficiency, you can join a program from the Nashua Area Interfaith

Council called Circles: Greater Nashua Prosper. We are aiming to create fifteen Circles, each led by a person or a family who has graduated from one of the area's transitional housing or adult learning programs. Around each of them will be two or three Allies from the middle class – not mentors, but community members who can be a sounding board, and an encouraging friend, and who might have connections or ideas in response to an economic or education goal the leader identifies.

All the Circles will meet at the same time, so we can build a group in Greater Nashua from the start of fifty or more people from all economic and social backgrounds, to work together and broaden our view of what our community needs. I have been co-chair for the planning of this project, and we are ready to get moving this winter. If you're interested, come and talk to me. We will have an information session about this at the synagogue within the next few weeks.

At our synagogue, we have an annual ritual of giving: the CROP Walk, our interfaith anti-hunger rally and fundraiser three weeks from tomorrow, on Sunday, October 26. Our synagogue has the great honor of hosting a mighty gathering of several hundred people, from all faiths in our area. We raise annually about \$50,000. One quarter stays locally to fund food pantries, and the rest goes overseas to fight hunger and disease and create access to clean water in the developing world. It's the one other time all year we break down the back wall of the Sanctuary. We walk hand in hand as people of faith through the heart of Nashua. We come back here for a barbecue and to hear music from the Raymond Street Klezmer Band and the New Fellowship Gospel Choir.

I have to confess that I always have two feelings, as I stand up then to address the gathered people. I am so proud, and moved, to see so many people in one place sharing a concern for justice and a desire to eliminate suffering – and proud, that we are

identified as the religious congregation at the forefront of that. I am also disappointed that we don't do more as a community during the year, or tell each other enough what we are doing individually. So I want to embrace two goals. The first is the goal of our member Becky Green, who chairs this event for the interfaith council: that we increase our participation in this 30th annual CROP Walk by 30 members. The second is that you use the CROP Walk as a reminder of this talk. As a spur to do more, to explore your giving, and to tell one another what it is that we are doing and try to do to reduce hunger and poverty in our world.

There is an incredible generosity among us, waiting to be unleashed even more. I didn't tell you the whole story of this year's Ice Bucket Challenge. According to Susannah Elliot, a reporter for the Columbus Dispatch in Ohio, the idea of a charitable challenge involving ice water goes back to a number of evangelical Christian communities. At the beginning of March, people from these communities began filming themselves jumping into wintery rivers or pouring ice water on themselves in the snow, and then calling out someone else to do the same. Some of the early videos from March seem like just a fun way for people to identify with their faith community, and to encourage someone else to do the same out loud.

But early on, those people started to challenge each other to contribute to a cause. Quickly, a lot of this original faith-inspired challenge was about water – much of the money raised went to dig wells and provide safe water in Africa.

In the end, what will stick with me about this summer of giving is that version, which they called the original 24 Hour Ice Water Challenge. Not the short bursts of water, but the rivers people jumped into, that flow with giving. Not the one-time video connecting us to celebrities we don't know, but the statement that this giving community of faith is

my identity.

Let that be our inspiration. Let us make this *Shmittah* year a time not only of generosity when asked, but of probing and deepening our giving together. So that it flows and flows, and defines who we are.

