

Interfaith Thanksgiving Service CSZ 2008

Rabbi Camille Shira Angel

### **Welcoming Remarks**

Welcome. I am so glad you have come to this annual service of thanksgiving. I am Rabbi Camille Shira Angel, the spiritual leader of this Jewish community and it is an honor to have you in our home this evening.

For the last seven years, we have met on this night, the Tuesday of Thanksgiving Week, to offer up our gratitude for our manifold blessings; to raise some food and money for the San Francisco Food Bank; and to greet one another across lines of faith, class and race.

As people connected to sacred texts, each of us here tonight, regardless of which faith community we are from, each of us holds dear, the verse from Leviticus “You shall love the stranger as yourself.” “*V’ahavta ha-ger camocha.*” In our sanctuary, we’ve inscribed these words on our stained glass windows as a way to highlight this mandate.

Love of the stranger appears in the Hebrew Scripture thirty-six times, more than any other verse in the Torah. God loves the stranger. As the philosopher Hermann Cohen put it, “The discovery of the stranger is the discovery of humanity.”

And so tonight, we reach out to each other, and link arms to lessen the sense of being strangers to one another. In just a moment, in an attempt to make this more than merely symbolic, I’d like to invite you to switch seats with someone so that you are sitting next to someone you don’t yet know. I’d like to encourage you to introduce yourselves, to find out what neighborhood you live in and what religious community you affiliate with. I also want to ask you to share one of your reasons for being grateful today.

After a couple minutes, you will hear my voice calling you back, so that we can continue our service together.

*(Congregants Meet and Greet One Another. Called back with Cantor and Rabbi singing Hinei Ma Tov)*

I'd like to end with a short blessing written by Jessica Prentice, because I believe it is one that we all need to hear.

“...[M]ay we find within our hearts the faith, hope and love to live ourselves into a world where action is balanced by relationship, and vision is balanced by tradition. May each of us have the opportunity to make the contribution to the world that we have been called to make. May each of us give the gift that we came here to bear. And may these gifts feed the hunger for connection that is such an enduring part of the human condition, so that we may have that delicious experience of being—at least for a moment—well fed” [p. 308 - Prentice, Jessica. *Full Moon Feast: Food and the Hunger for Connection*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2006].

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### **Drash on Toldot**

“Tov L'hodot l'Adonai – it is good to give thanks unto God.” Psalm 92. Words that come from long ago and far away; they were sung by the Levites in the Temple every Sabbath two thousand years ago.

A legend, a midrash says that Adam and Eve sang these words in gratitude after their first night on earth, when the morning came and they celebrated the first Sabbath day. They sang, that is, after they had spent hours in the dark – after darkness had descended on them suddenly, without warning and without explanation; for night, after all, was a mystery to these brand-new beings.

The dark and the cold must have felt like a permanent state of being that very first time; it must have felt like the night would never, ever go away. Psalm 92 is a cry of amazement and gratitude; its words have given voice, ever since, to our affirmation that the darkness is not forever, for light and warmth do come back to the world.

“It is good to give thanks unto God,” says the psalm, “...to declare Your love in the morning and Your constancy in the night.” It is good, that is, to have a faith that sustains us not just in the morning, when the sun is shining and all is well, but in the night as well – when the doctor’s report is not so good; when the certainties slip away; when fearful things descend on our dreams.

This has been a particularly difficult season for many of us. Our country’s economic crisis has made many of us feel anxious about our own financial well-being. Tensions ran high during the many months leading up to the elections, and some of our most hoped for initiatives for change..... passed or didn’t pass... leaving too many of us feeling a measure of despair, our basic needs for healthcare, food, affordable housing, and civil rights unmet. Yes, it has been a hard year for some of us more than for others.

Jews read from the Scriptures this week, The Book of Genesis, chapter 26 opens with these words, “There was a famine in the land.” 3000 years ago, our people knew famine. Today, there are people in our golden gate city who know a profound sense of hunger.

According to the 2000 and 2005 U.S. Census, nearly 150,000 San Franciscans struggle each day to feed themselves and their families. Hunger manifests itself as a consistent lack of enough food to meet nutritional requirements. It can mean fewer meals each day and poor-quality food that is calorie-rich but nutrient-poor.

150,000 is the number of people who live at or below the poverty line, which means that nearly one in four children and one in three seniors do not have access to enough food to meet their nutritional needs on a regular basis.

Hunger is a citywide phenomenon that afflicts people without regard for age, ethnicity, gender, family size and employment status.

Hunger exists in virtually every neighborhood in San Francisco. In most neighborhoods, a **minimum** of 10% of the population experiences some kind of disruption to their daily nutritional

needs. 60% of the households who receive weekly groceries through the San Francisco Food Bank include at least one working adult, while 18% of their clients are homeless.

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### **How can so many people be hungry in San Francisco?**

\$22,880 is the income cutoff for Food Stamps for a family of three. That's not even half of what it actually costs in San Francisco to raise a family. And at that income level, families are eligible for only the minimum monthly benefit of \$10.

The Federal Food Stamp program serves over 26 million people in the US, or, about 1 in 11 people across our country.

Last year I read about the Food Stamp Challenge, a campaign to call attention to the inadequacies in public policy. It was launched in various places around the country in an effort to strengthen support for the most recent Farm Bill. Which while it passed, and did make some incremental improvements to the Food Stamp program, many people who are disqualified from governmental nutrition programs still do not earn enough to make ends meet and feed their families.

I was and remain intrigued by the Food Stamp Challenge. The Challenge invites participants to take the pledge that they will spend only \$42 per week per person on food between any given Monday through Friday, which is equivalent to living within the food stamp budget. The goals of the Challenge are to:

- Increase public awareness of the challenges and perceptions of participants in the food stamp program.
- Increase monetary and food donations to food banks.
- Increase the number of volunteers for soup kitchens.
- Obtain a first-hand experience of eating at a soup kitchen and hearing the challenges of our neighboring citizens.

The Food Banks are running painfully low this season. Supply is down and demand is up. SFFB and Project Open Hand need 68,000 volunteer hours yearly to meet their needs. You and I can help in more ways than one. We can donate money; we can donate food; we can donate time. We can raise awareness by organizing our own Food Stamp Challenge.

The only thing we cannot do is ignore the hunger problem in our city. We must love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Some of our neighbors are hungry. We must feed our neighbors as we feed ourselves.

Eboo Patel, Executive Director of Interfaith Youth Core writes, “Change happens internally before it takes place in the world.”

As we sit down to our Thanksgiving meals, let us consider what changes we might make, in order to address the famine in our land. Let us be generous and gracious with our sense of abundance. Tov L'hodot – For, It is good to give thanks. “It is good to give thanks to the Eternal” - to sing a song of optimism AND MORE, to demonstrate our faith with actions of justice and compassion.

Baruch Ata Adonai, Blessed Are You, Holy One of Blessing and of Mystery, we give You thanks, not in the spirit of complacency, but rather we thank YOU for the faith that inspires us TO WORK for human rights, human welfare, and universal peace.

Together let us say: Amen.