



# FROM THE SOURCES:

## TEXTS ON JEWISH SOCIAL JUSTICE



***Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: Bounty and Scarcity  
A Case Study on Haiti***

# Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: Bounty and Scarcity

## How to Use this Publication

*From the Sources* is designed to facilitate study around issues of social justice and the Jewish holidays. We explore global justice issues through Jewish and secular texts, questions to spark reflection and discussion, and further background reading. We invite you to engage in the texts and use them to learn, teach and take action.

Use *From the Sources* to:

- **Learn with others.** Read through this text study together with a friend, a group of friends or family and discuss the issues it raises. Bring it to your holiday dinner table to spark discussion with your family and guests.
- **Enrich your own learning.** This resource aims to inspire thought-provoking and challenging perspectives on the holiday texts. Read it on your own at synagogue or at home.
- **Teach.** Invite others to share in this learning. Use it as the basis for a *dvar Torah* or to motivate action in support of advocacy or *tzedakah* initiatives in your synagogue, school or workplace. Share this resource with others you think will be interested.

## I. Introduction

Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of a new year and celebrates the creation of the world. It is a time of abundance, presaging the feast of plenty we celebrate on Sukkot. As with many Jewish holidays, festive meals are a central element of the day, with many families and communities preparing a Seder-like parade of foods that symbolize different hopes for the New Year. The centrality of food during Rosh Hashanah exists in stark contrast to the scarcity we experience while fasting on Yom Kippur—abstaining from food to help us focus on the task of repentance. This juxtaposition of experiences with food comes during a period of time when we are asked to better ourselves and the world in the year to come. With their different ways of engaging us in eating and its absence, the contrast between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur offers us the opportunity to reflect more broadly on the bounty and scarcity that exists in the global food system and how we can contribute to alleviating hunger this year.



## II. Rosh Hashanah and the Experience of Bounty

On Rosh Hashanah, eating is elevated from celebration to symbolism, becoming a part of the tradition itself. Plays on words or tastes become vehicles for the expression of our hopes for the year to come.

### Noam Zion, “Seder Rosh Hashanah: Symbolic Foods and New Year Wishes”

Rosh Hashana[h]’s evening meal may encompass an ancient custom of eating symbolic foods, a mini-seder, if you will. The family tastes (or at least holds up for a New Year’s wish) a variety of foods whose name, shape or color remind us of our greatest hopes for the New Year... Since the days of the Talmud the foods on the holiday table have been transformed into informal symbols of our New Year wishes. Best-known are the apples dipped in honey that symbolize a sweet year. Yet even the most ordinary vegetables, seasonal fruits and miscellaneous foods provide us an occasion to wish away our fears and verbalize our deepest hope.

Some communities prepare special meals following the example of the Shulchan Aruch.

#### Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim, Rosh Hashanah 583:1

On Rosh Hashanah a person should be accustomed to eating fenugreek, a leek or cabbage, beets, dates and gourd. And (for example) when eating fenugreek (*roobia* in Hebrew) one should say, "May it be God's will that our merits increase (*yirbu*)."

#### שולחן ערוך אורח חיים ראש השנה תקפג:א

יהא אדם רגיל לאכול בראש השנה רוביא  
דהיינו תלתן כרתי סילקא תמרי קרא  
וכשיאכל רוביא יאמר: יהי רצון שירבו  
זכויותינו...

- Are there foods that your family traditionally eats on Rosh Hashanah? What are your associations with those foods?
- What role do meals and food play in how you celebrate the New Year?

### III. Yom Kippur and the Experience of Scarcity

In contrast to the symbolic eating on Rosh Hashanah, on Yom Kippur the symbolism is tied up in the denial of sustenance. Fasting on Yom Kippur is infused with meaning: a way of engaging in repentance, turning inward and experiencing scarcity in order to motivate spiritual and moral change. The following two texts present perspectives on the utility of fasting.

#### Jonah 3:4-9

Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he had the word cried through Nineveh: "By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast—of flock or herd—shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! They shall be covered with sackcloth—man and beast—and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? God may turn back from God's wrath, so that we do not perish."

#### יונה ג:ד-ט

ויחל יונה לבוא בעיר  
מהלך יום אחד ויקרא ויאמר עוד  
ארבעים יום ונינוה נהפכת: ויאמינו  
אנשי נינוה באלהים ויקראו צום  
וילבשו שקים מגדולם ועד קטנם: ויגע  
הדבר אל מלך נינוה ויקם מכסאו ויעבר  
אדרתו מעליו ויכס שק וישב על האפר:  
ויזעק ויאמר בנינוה מטעם המלך  
וגדליו לאמר האדם והבהמה הבקר  
ההצאן אל יטעמו מאומה אל ירעו ומים  
אל ישתו: ויתכסו שקים האדם  
והבהמה ויקראו אל אלהים בחזקה  
וישבו איש מדרכו הרעה ומן החמס  
אשר בכפיהם: מי יודע ישוב ונחם  
האלהים ושב מחרון אפו ולא נאבד:

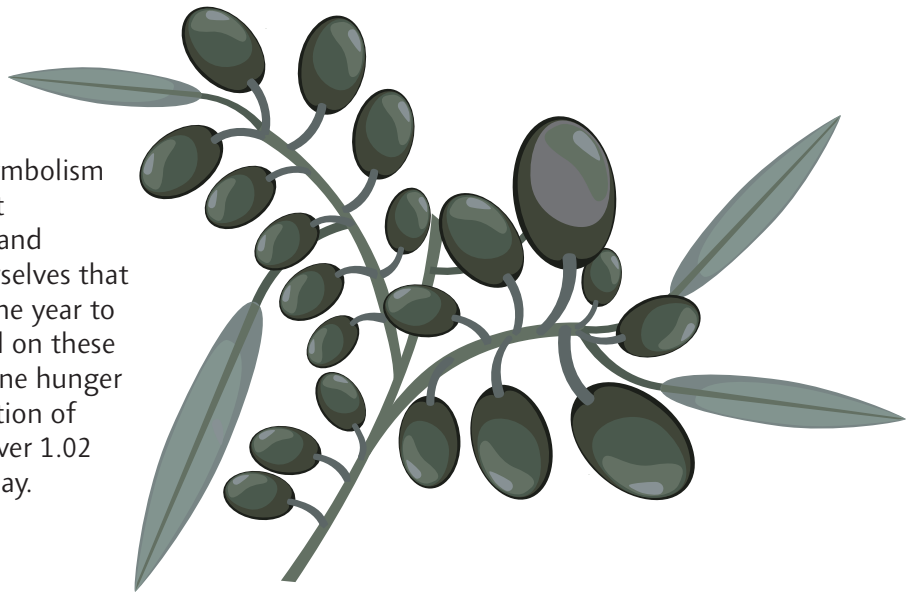
#### Jay Michaelson, "Fasting from a Functional Perspective: Recovering the Benefits of Denial."

Fasting is an opportunity: the momentum of thought decreases, and you become quite satisfied just to be here now... It's no wonder, then, that fasting has been part of contemplative, prophetic and even magical practices from the Bible to the present day. It's not that the altered state is enlightenment or *devekut*. Rather, in a concentrated mindstate... it's easier to see what you're looking for. None of this is magic; it's simple, and biological.

- What, if anything, have you learned about yourself through fasting? How does it contrast to your experience of Rosh Hashanah?
- In the Jonah text, read during afternoon prayers on Yom Kippur, fasting is used as an entreaty to God, to represent repentance and a rejection of evil ways. What does fasting represent for you? How does it relate to your process of repentance and personal transformation?

## IV. From Bounty to Scarcity: Our Global Food System

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the symbolism of food and its absence is used to construct particular experiences. We impose bounty and hunger to help us effect the changes in ourselves that are necessary to lead more ethical lives in the year to come. Ultimately, our interaction with food on these holy days is metaphorical. When we examine hunger in the Global South, however, the construction of bounty and scarcity is not just symbolic. Over 1.02 billion people face hunger in our world today.



### **What is Hunger? From Nectar in a Sieve by Kamala Markandaya, 2002**

... Hunger is a curious thing: At first it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and there is a gnawing and a pain as if your vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost... then the pain is no longer sharp but dull, and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you... then that too is gone, all pain, all desire, only a great emptiness is left, like the sky, like a well in drought.

- How does the experience of hunger in this text contrast with your own experience of fasting? How is it similar?
- What do you imagine causes food scarcity for so many people in our world?

### **The Oakland Institute, "Food Aid or Food Sovereignty: Ending Hunger in Our Time," 2005**

We need to first understand what causes hunger. Certainly it is not scarcity. Not when abundance best describes the world's food supply. World agriculture produces 17 percent more calories per person today than it did 30 years ago, despite a 70 percent population increase. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (2002) this is enough to provide everyone in the world with at least 2,720 kilocalories (kcal) per person per day. No, we cannot blame nature. Food is always available for those who can afford it, even in times of natural disasters such as droughts and floods... If it is not nature or scarcity, what then is the cause of hunger amidst plenty? The problem is the scarcity of democracy and the denial of human rights. Hunger is linked to the denial of a living wage to the working poor and land to the landless, for example. While, right now, the resources exist to end hunger worldwide, those resources continue to be exploited by few.

- What causes does this text attribute to hunger? In what ways are these causes similar or different from the ways you think about hunger globally?
- What does this text teach you about the construction of bounty and scarcity in our global food system?



In the Yom Kippur *haftarah*, we read the words of Isaiah, who reminds us that our experience of fasting is meant to inspire us to pursue justice.

**Isaiah 58:6-7**

No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry.

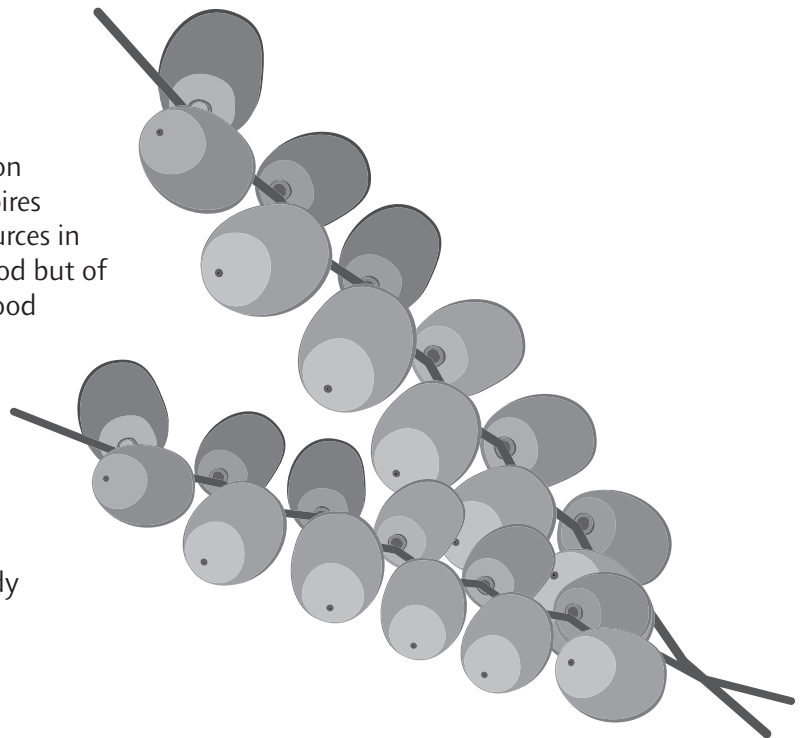
**ישעיהו נח:ו-ז**

הלא זה צום אבחרהו פתח חרצבות רשע  
התר אגדות מוטה ושלה רצוצים חפשים  
וכל מוטה תנתקו: הלא פרס לרעב לחמך  
ועניים מרודים תביא בית כי תראה ערם  
וכסיתו ומבשרך לא תתעלם:

- What does it mean to “share your bread with the hungry”? How do you interpret your responsibility to those who face hunger?
- How might your experience of eating on Rosh Hashanah and fasting on Yom Kippur inform your reactions to global hunger?
- What are some ways that the global food system impacts your own eating habits?

## V. Conclusion

Feasting and fasting during this period of repentance provides us the opportunity to reflect on the construction of bounty and scarcity in our global food system. It inspires us to address the unequal distribution of food and resources in our world. Global hunger is not a result of scarcity of food but of political and economic policies that govern our global food system and don't prioritize feeding the world's hungry. Despite an abundance of food in the world, the magnitude of hunger today is growing at a faster rate than ever before. Yet global hunger is entirely preventable. We have the power to impact policies that affect those vulnerable to hunger. To learn more about the causes of hunger, its solutions and what you can do to take action, please see the following case study on Haiti.





# A Case Study on Haiti

## Introduction

The Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *From the Sources* addresses bounty and scarcity in our global food system. In the U.S., a government study uncovered that we waste an astonishing 27 percent of food available for consumption.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, there are 1.02 billion undernourished people in the world today. That means that nearly one in six people does not get enough food to be healthy and lead an active life.<sup>2</sup> This resource is intended to explain the structural causes of such an enormous disparity in our global food system and what can be done to address this challenge. We use Haiti as a case study to provide an in-depth exploration of the causes of hunger for one country.

## Hunger in Haiti

One of the biggest misconceptions about global hunger is that it is synonymous with localized, temporary cases of famine that result from war or natural disaster. In reality, hunger afflicts millions of people every day who are too poor to afford adequate and nutritious food. This kind of hunger does not attract news coverage, but it is a leading cause of death and disease in the world. In most cases, pervasive hunger in the Global South exists not because there is a scarcity of food, but because those facing poverty do not have the ability to purchase or access it.

Haiti attracted international attention when a massive earthquake struck in January 2010, killing an estimated 300,000 people<sup>3</sup> and leaving many more vulnerable to hunger. But while the earthquake exacerbated food insecurity in Haiti, hunger is not new to Haitians. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that before the quake, 1.9 million Haitians faced food insecurity.<sup>4</sup>

## Infertile Land and Insufficient Resources

Haiti is one of the few countries in the Western hemisphere where the vast majority of people live and work in the rural sector. However, earning a living from the land in Haiti is extremely difficult. Haiti has been devastated by centuries of deforestation, and today only two percent of the country's forests survive. Deforestation began in the early 19th century when French colonists built coffee and sugar plantations and continued as a result of an unfettered timber industry. Most recently, as the population of Haiti grew and its economy did not, rural Haitians were forced to clear larger and larger swaths of land for subsistence farming. Charcoal produced from trees also provided an essential source of fuel and income for families. Deforestation in Haiti has caused severe soil erosion and vulnerability to floods. Soil has washed down into rivers, leading to sediment buildup that has polluted drinking water and destroyed fisheries. Because rain is not being absorbed into the soil, water tables have dwindled and drought has ensued.<sup>5</sup> Subsistence farmers cannot afford to invest in agricultural inputs (such as fertilizer, improved seeds or irrigation systems) to compensate for poor soil quality. Furthermore, economic inequality means that those who cannot afford arable land end up in the least-fertile regions in Haiti. Given these factors, it is no wonder that 86 percent of the rural population in Haiti lives on less than \$2 per day.

## Ineffective Governance and Inequitable Trade and Aid Policies

Haiti's history is marked by foreign exploitation and occupation, profound political instability, weak rule of law, political corruption and economic mismanagement. Political instability coupled with frequent natural disasters and environmental degradation has made it impossible for the Haitian government to secure the needs of its people. As a result, international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF have stepped in at different points to provide loans for infrastructure and basic needs. However, these loans created serious debt and required the Haitian government to implement economic policies to make Haiti more attractive to foreign investment at the expense of most Haitians. For example, in 1995 the IMF pressured Haiti to slash its tariffs on imported rice from 35 percent to 3 percent. Taking advantage of these low tariffs, the U.S. government began exporting U.S. subsidized rice to Haiti, causing the Haitian rice industry to collapse. In 1998, 47 percent of Haiti's rice was produced domestically, by 2008 it declined to 15 percent.<sup>6</sup> While U.S. rice was cheaper than Haitian rice, and theoretically easier for Haitians to afford, most Haitians were too poor to withstand the price instability that characterizes the global food economy, especially with no industry of their own to

provide income. In the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, President Clinton apologized for the trade agreements that he implemented while in office:

*I have to live every day with the consequences of the lost capacity to produce a rice crop in Haiti to feed those people, because of what I did—nobody else...[It was an effort to] free those places to ... skip agricultural development and go straight into the industrial era... [but it has] failed everywhere it's been tried ... you just can't take the food chain out of production ... it also undermines a lot of the culture, the fabric of life, the sense of self-determination.<sup>7</sup>*

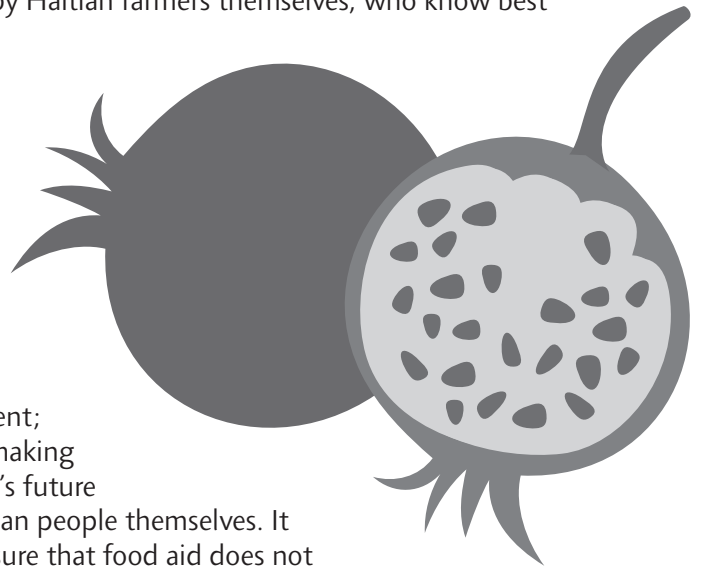
Trade policies are compounded by the flood of food aid sent by international governments to respond to various humanitarian crises. Food aid often ends up in local markets, making it even more difficult for local farmers to compete.

## Solutions

Local food production in Haiti has been devastated by environmental degradation, political instability, economic mismanagement and the influx of cheap agricultural goods through international trade and aid. As a result, Haitians are dependent on the global food economy. However, the lack of job opportunities in Haiti means that global food prices are too expensive for most Haitians to afford, or markets are too far away to access. The case of Haiti helps us understand how hunger and food scarcity result from the political and economic policies that govern our global food system and that do not prioritize those most vulnerable to poverty.

The 2010 earthquake mobilized the international community to help Haitians rebuild their country and develop their economy. In order to ensure long-term food security for Haitians, these efforts must include a strong commitment to strengthen local agricultural production. AJWS grantees like The Lambi Fund are supporting reforestation efforts and helping farmers obtain agricultural materials, build irrigation systems and community cisterns, and rebuild destroyed sugar and grain mills. These solutions are proposed by Haitian farmers themselves, who know best what they need to thrive.

In addition to supporting community efforts to strengthen local food production, the international community must make sure that food aid, trade and economic policies do not undermine these efforts. This means beginning to shift food aid from in-kind food donations to local procurement and cash donations to stimulate Haiti's food economy. It also means allowing Haitians to make decisions on trade barriers and economic policies that support what's best for impoverished Haitians. Haitian grassroots organizations are best positioned to determine the course of Haiti's redevelopment; yet their voices have largely been excluded from the decision-making process. AJWS's advocacy team is working to ensure that Haiti's future is not steered by the international community, but by the Haitian people themselves. It is also advocating for reform of the U.S. food aid system to ensure that food aid does not undermine local agriculture production. To learn more about these advocacy efforts and get involved, please visit [www.ajws.org/foodjustice](http://www.ajws.org/foodjustice).



1 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/weekinreview/18martin.html>

2 <http://www.wfp.org/hunger>

3 [http://www.interaction.org/ngo\\_impact\\_haiti](http://www.interaction.org/ngo_impact_haiti)

4 <http://www.wfp.org/stories/haiti-10-hunger-facts>

5 <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/07/16/a-tree-grows-in-haiti.htm>

6 <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=88857>

7 Ibid

---

***For more information on this and other educational resources from the AJWS, please contact us at [education@ajws.org](mailto:education@ajws.org).***

---

American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is an international development organization motivated by Judaism's imperative to pursue justice. AJWS is dedicated to alleviating poverty, hunger and disease among the people of the developing world regardless of race, religion or nationality. Through grants to grassroots organizations, volunteer service, advocacy and education, AJWS fosters civil society, sustainable development and human rights for all people, while promoting the values and responsibilities of global citizenship within the Jewish community.