

# OPINION

## A thought for Thanksgiving: Rich or poor on Yom Kippur

### GUEST COLUMNIST

MELISSANNE  
MYERS

Early in September my grade-school daughter and I went camping with another single mom and her two kids. The deal was that the other mom would do the driving and pay for the campsite and firewood if I brought the tents and other camping equipment. The night before our camping trip, as I sat among the equipment I had borrowed from various friends and relatives, I organized our share of the food. Our food that was not bought with food stamps came from the Squirrel Hill Food Pantry. My daughter knew about the food pantry and our occasional use of it. Just the week before she had helped me take home food from the pantry after we had spent the morning as volunteers sorting and bagging food.

My daughter watched me that early September night as I was packing for our camping trip. "Mom," she said with a huge grin, "Look at all this stuff. And we're going on a vacation! I feel so rich." I smiled back, feeling the same.

A few weeks later we took the bus to our synagogue for morning services on Yom Kippur. I attended services in the sanctuary while my daughter participated in the children's program. When I went to pick her up, children passed me carrying jars covered in freshly glued-on yellow tissue paper. Oddly, my daughter greeted me with empty hands.

"Didn't you make a yellow jar?"

"Yes," she said as she reluctantly retrieved her jar from the table on which it had been abandoned. I assured her it was as nice as the other kids' jars and urged her to take it home with us. As we waited with her yellow jar at the bus stop, my daughter explained to me that it was supposed to be a jar for tzedakah. Specifically, the yellow jar was a jar for collecting money to be given to the Squirrel Hill Food Pantry.

"It feels wrong to give something only so they can give it back to us," she said. Then her face grew serious. "Mom, are we poor?"

I was glad I had meditated on some of what I had read aloud with my congregation that morning in the sanctuary. I remembered the statement that a person could be poor even when surrounded by material wealth, but a person was rich if content with their lot. I explained this concept to my daughter. I also talked with her about the mitzvahs we do. I talked about how bagging others people's groceries at the pantry, celebrating Shabbat through song with elders at the local senior center, and other ways in which we give of our time together are not only mitzvahs but tzedakah in the form of time rather than money.

Still, we had this empty yellow jar we were carrying home. Once back in our apartment we dumped out our money jug and sorted our change. Quarters were needed for laundry. Nickels and dimes were needed for her bus fares. But the plethora of pennies went directly into the yellow jar. Like the other kids who had been gluing tissue paper that morning, my daughter too was now collecting coins for tzedakah. However, her money would not go to the Squirrel Hill Food Pantry. The night before at the Kol Nidre service I had committed to giving \$25 for

disaster relief even though I was not sure how I'd come up with the money. Together we decided that, in early November, her yellow jar's collected contents would help me honor that commitment.

Empty yellow jar issue resolved, Yom Kippur day continued. In the late afternoon one of my health care providers stopped in. After checking on me, he volunteered to help me finally figure out how to hook up a converter to my analog television. That night, in the warmth of our cozy attic apartment, my daughter

reclined on a donated sofa, eating spaghetti noodles mixed with spices and canned green beans, drinking milk poured from a carton chilled after sitting awhile on our pantry shelf, simply staring gleefully at a television rerun. As I was looking at my daughter's contentment, it was plain for me to see that she once again felt rich. I do too.

*(Melissanne Myers recently left her graduate studies program at the University of Pittsburgh for medical reasons and hopes to return in the fall of 2010.)*



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