

The Misappropriation of Zero Sum
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This summer, our family planted tomatoes. And, with great delight, we watched the vines grow.

Now, I am an enthusiastic tomato eater. Overconfident, I thought I could keep up with our crop...I could not.

And so began our front-yard, farm-to-neighbor, tomato CSA. The girls and I would pick 5-6 gorgeous heirlooms in the early evenings and deliver them around the block.

The ritual was easy - and kind of familiar - and then I remembered: this is what I did with my father when I was little.

We'd fill a metal grocery cart (I have no idea how he got it) with zucchini, corn, peppers, and tomatoes, and we'd push it down Jeffrey Lane in Bridgewater, New Jersey stopping at neighbors' homes to ask if they'd like some fresh veggies for their dinner.

I told the girls about Zaide Dan, and their Mama as a young girl, and what abundance looked like then and now, and the delight of sharing, knowing you had enough.

By contrast, there was March of 2020, when there was no toilet paper. No baby wipes. No flour or yeast

Mayor Garcetti messaged Angelinos: We did not need to hoard. The supply chains would hold. And still, the fear was palpable.

In December of 2020, the vaccines were introduced. By January, the race was on to secure an early shot. Portals crashed. WhatsApp groups swapped best strategies. Adult children woke up in the middle of the night to try and secure a spot for their parents on the East Coast.

We did not trust our neighbors to play by the rules. We did not know what sources of information to follow. And, so, as a result, it was hard to imagine that anyone (let alone the government) could care for our needs better than us.

How else could we see our lives, except through a Zero-Sum Lens? A myopic, self-destructive view of social relations, supply + demand, scarcity and competition.

Zero-Sum Thinking: Your gain is my loss, or, conversely, your loss is my gain. It works well when you're talking about slices of cake. But what we don't want to do is apply it to people or resources that are NOT in fact limited or scarce.

Instead of thinking expansively, and collaboratively, Zero-Sum Thinking emphasizes limitations, competition and humiliation. In other words: there are a finite amount of goods in the world. Everybody is out for themselves. And you're a sucker if you don't grab it while you can.

"Ah, but Rabbi," you may say, "I shared extra loaves of sourdough with my neighbor." True. This past year was not without its moments of generosity. But do you remember how it felt to unexpectedly secure a carton of eggs, a bottle of Clorox wipes, or arrive at the store just as a new shipment of hand sanitizer was being shelved?

Woohoo! We had won the game!

But, be honest, the rush was short-lived. Zero-Sum Thinking means when you run out, you have to return to the arena of the market-place or the internet to fight again. Your gain is my loss. Your loss is my gain.

Zero-Sum Thinking feeds on fear and competition. It decimates our faith in one another. If we don't alter our course, and change how we see ourselves and our resources, we are setting ourselves up to repeat our behaviors in the New Year. And when the next crisis hits (and sadly, we know it will) we will revert back to scarcity and competition, resentment and fear and deeper mistrust. And it won't take a forced quarantine to make us feel isolated and alone.

But Zero-Sum Thinking is a choice. And we can make a different one.

The Jewish people have nurtured a tradition of abundance and expansiveness, and connection and collaboration, since the early days of creation, and we need to reclaim it as we begin this New Year. We need to put down the Zero-Sum Lens and begin a new "accounting" as we enter 5782.

Judaism is a tradition anchored in and by COMMUNITY. A clear and powerful refutation of Zero-Sum. A forceful argument against the claim that it is better for us to go it alone. In truth, Judaism was never that interested in the individual. God's blessing for Abraham isn't about making him a great person, it's about making him a great nation.

As Jews, we do not count our assets only by what we see before us, or what we can grasp in our hands. Our choice to be part of a covenantal community means we can count on each other. For a synagogue, that means spiritual, educational and even economic resources are available, offered, and abundant.

Just look at the Temple Isaiah Networking Group. It was founded as a way for congregants to support one another's small businesses. Rather than go it alone, 32 people now look out for one another through specific and deliberate referrals.

Rather than go it alone, Judaism commands that 10 adults gather in order to say prayers. So that when a person is in mourning and obligated to say the Kaddish, there will be 9 other people with them.

Even when we study, we know there is unique, collective wisdom that emerges from a Beit Midrash. That God's presence rewards those who study together.

So, what if now, we leaned into Jewish wisdom that said: there is infinite worth in being part of a whole? In which the sum of our parts is calculated by tribe and not by individual?

Would we feel less anxious about scarcity?

Would we feel more inspired to act collectively knowing others are acting along with us?

Would we feel less isolated and alone?

Early on in the pandemic, we gathered adult leaders on Zoom to see how the different Isaiah groups could collaborate. Every single adult on the call was an empty nester, except for one K12 parent who was, herself, surprised that she was even able to log on for the call. She told us parents of children were drowning.

They had no time to parent. No time to work. They were losing jobs or debating who should leave a job in order to watch the kids. Mental health issues abounded.

And as the Empty Nesters heard this they asked: Can we help? Could we tutor your children via Zoom? Could we entertain them for 30 minutes to give you a break?

Community reminds us that others do not always have what they need and that we might have the puzzle piece they are missing.

Community reminds us that we have more than we realize, and that we can give freely to others without feeling depleted or deprived.

Community reminds us that it matters not only who shows up but also who is missing (like when the Shabbat regulars notice someone isn't sitting in their seat) the practice of living in community is endemic to the Jewish people.

So is the practice of preparing generations to come, in order for them to make the powerful choice to be part of something bigger than themselves, and to turn away from Zero-Sum. Community gets bigger when we add in the work of LEGACY.

Zero-Sum terrorizes us that we won't have enough time.

Grab it while you can.

Don't be a sucker.

Legacy reminds us that Jews have never let death get in the way of achieving our goals.

Right from the start, we have been encouraged to dream beyond our years. In the Book of Genesis, God says to Abraham: "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the shore"

What God is saying is: You are the BEGINNING of something beautiful and enduring. You won't get to see them all, but I'll show you a glimpse. And someday, future generations will stand in awe, and they will know it began with you.

The Talmud remembers that Rabbi Yudan once said: "No person leaves this world with even half their dreams and aspirations in hand."

Put differently, as we die, we are holding onto half of what we'd hoped to accomplish.

Rabbi Yudan knew, whenever the moment of death occurs, it's almost always too soon. We yearn for more time. We know what could have been achieved, but the time was cut short.

We could curse the Creator for a design that leaves us heartbroken. Instead, we are asked to bless the Divine Architect for giving us the ability to desire, dream, aspire, and love in greater sum than we could possibly achieve no matter the length of our days.

We are living, breathing examples of abundance. We have more than we can possibly "use" in our lifetime. And as we acknowledge our mortal limitations, we expand our capacity to share the abundance with future generations.

That's the Jewish way. We turn our grief for what we will not complete, into opportunities for the next generation to embrace our dreams of racial equality, and see if it also becomes theirs. To offer them what we loved about strengthening democracy, and see if they might love it, too. We take the time to tell them our hopes for a world that will recognize and respond to the climate crisis and hope they take them up as their own.

We are a people who live and breathe abundance, sharing resources from one generation to the next. Our Creator-God did not build with a Zero-Sum Mindset and neither should we.

This year, I am asking you to do 3 things, for your own sake, for the sake of our community, and the health and wellbeing of our city, state and nation.

#1

Think about what seeds you want to plant now. What is your vision for what you love and how it continues? Tell your friends, your children and grandchildren how much that vision means to you. Write an ethical will, update your estate plan with new commitments to charities, give away something NOW while you're alive.

#2

Call out Zero-Sum Thinking when you hear it. Challenge yourself and others to apply a different lens. The Jewish lens.

#3

Join a small group at Temple Isaiah. Rabbi Zoe will be talking about this more tomorrow. They need you. We need you. Be more than the sum of your parts. Be a resource for someone and let someone be a resource for you.

Do these 3 things and we begin to chip away at the artificial edifice of Zero-Sum to reveal the Divine blueprint hidden below. In partnership with those before us, and those who will come after, we have everything we need to build something exquisite and eternal.

My father, of blessed memory, had plans to retire at 65.

He died at 61.

There were vacations and golf games and graduations to attend.

There were unopened boxes of photography gear.

Jackets with their tags still on.

A physician turned patient, he embraced the time he had left lecturing at conferences, sharing a perspective from “the other side of the stethoscope.” A new career in his final months.

There was more he dreamed of doing.

Even with the limitations, or maybe because of them, he would die with only half his dreams in hand.

His death most certainly shaped the person you see before you. But more than his death, it is how he lived his life that shapes me.

It all comes down to the tomatoes. The ones we picked in Bridgewater, exquisitely connected to the ones my daughters and I delivered in Rancho Park, and the ones they will take to their neighbors and friends someday.

“You are the beginning of something beautiful and enduring.”

Something expansive and abundant.

Tonight, we pray for a glimpse of that future, that we may begin again.