

CHANGING THE WORLD ONE ACT AT A TIME

Former Secretary of State Madelyn Albright, who we were honored to have speak at our synagogue this year, summarized the state of world affairs over the summer when she commented that *"to put it mildly: the world is a mess"* (**CBS interview with Bob Schieffer 7/27/14**).

War, famine, sectarian violence, poverty, senseless hatred, environmental struggles- sometimes we all feel like we just want to turn off the TV, power down our smart phones, get off of social media- and take a break from the craziness of the world. A few months ago, I was taking such a break in my basement- doing a 5k run on my treadmill, minding my own business, and watching Rachael Ray on TV because the show that I had planned to watch did not record on the DVR. I was about to change the channel, but decided to stick with it when I learned that she was interviewing a woman named Shannon Leavitt and her ten year old son Kaden from Pacatello, Idaho who had begun a simple "pay it forward" campaign. Here's a bit of good news amidst "the mess", I thought to myself, and I kept watching.

The idea was simple, but profound. The Leavitts would do at least one good deed for someone each day, often strangers, and then hand them a card which read: *"Please do a good deed, whatever it may be. Then pass this card to that person and tell them to do the same thing...Pay it forward."* Shannon said that her inspiration came from her son Kaden, who was a naturally altruistic young boy. During the interview, Kaden recalled one incident in which he and his mom noticed a woman and her husband counting bills in their car at a gas station. Shannon went inside and paid for the couple's gas. As she said in an interview before the show:

"It doesn't matter where you come from or who you are, everybody deserves to have a good deed done for them. And who knows? Maybe doing a good deed for someone who isn't as nice could possibly change their attitude and change their life," Leavitt said.

(<http://www.localnews8.com/news/local-pay-it-forward-family-to-appear-on-rachael-ray-show/24766736>)

Another story I recently heard about paying it forward: Over the summer, a 73-year-old woman named Carol Flynn was in line at Walmart in Sioux Falls, South Dakota when she noticed a stranger, Katie Kanefke, who was checking out and set aside three out of four boxes of diapers that she had in her cart. Kanefke had intended to purchase all four boxes of diapers because she thought that the store would price-match each of them as she had seen the same brand advertised for a lower price elsewhere. But Walmart only agreed to match one out of the four boxes, leaving a total of \$140 worth of diapers, that she simply could not afford. Without any hesitation, Flynn placed the three boxes back in Kanefke's cart and paid for them. What neither woman knew is that a stranger in the store caught the entire thing on video and posted it to facebook, where it shortly went viral because people were so inspired by this act of generosity. When interviewed about her random act of kindness, Flynn, a retired state director of the March of Dimes said:

"Not that I'm wealthy or have a lot of money, but I certainly could afford to do that, so it was kind of an easy thing to do..."

(http://www.today.com/parents/random-act-kindness-walmart-store-goes-viral-1D79878628?cid=social_20140702_27131326)

Kanefke, who was somewhat embarrassed by all of the attention explained:

"I couldn't believe it. I was shocked. I kept saying thank you and God bless you...Then I walked out in the parking lot and started crying. It just hit me. It was an awesome statement of what God's love does."

Following this incident with the diapers and all of the media attention, Walmart made a \$1500 donation to March of Dimes, and Pampers sent Kanefke and her husband four large boxes of diapers. One small act of kindness moved two multi-billion dollar companies to make their own gestures, al be they small, of good will.

These stories are impressive and inspiring. How many of us would do what Carl Flynn did when waiting in line at Wegmans or Foodtown? Or, instead, would we simply pull out our phones and check e-mail, annoyed that the person in front of us is holding up the line.

I was struck by Kanefke's comment that "*it was an awesome statement of what God's love does.*" Putting these words in a Jewish context: just imagine what our world would look like if we recognized that we are **all** God's creatures, created to love, care for, and cherish one another in a way that brings healing, goodness, and wholeness into our world. Just imagine, what our lives would look like if we took the value of *Gemilut Hasadim*, acts of **chesed**, deeds of loving kindness, completely seriously as one of the cornerstones of what it means to live daily as a practicing Jew.

There is a story told, exemplifying this value of chesed, about the Rebbe of Nimrov who was late to shul every Yom Kippur. The story goes that:

Every year the rabbi of Nemirov was late for Yom Kippur services. And every year the people of the congregation would speculate about the reason. "Maybe the rabbi goes to visit the sick before services," some said. "Perhaps he prays alone for all of us before coming here to be with us," others suggested. Still other members of the congregation said, "Maybe he does something we just can't understand."

There were two precocious boys in the congregation, and they decided they would find out the truth about why the rabbi was always late. So the night before Yom Kippur, they sneaked into the rabbi's house and hid under his bed. They watched and waited as the rabbi got into bed and snored throughout the night.

While it was still dark, the boys looked on as the rabbi woke up, went to the closet, and put on clothes they had never seen him wear: heavy boots, overalls, a thick wool jacket, and a peasant hat. Once he was fully dressed, the rabbi took a long rope and slung it over his shoulder, grabbed an axe from the closet, and walked out of the house.

The two boys looked at each other in amazement and decided to follow the rabbi to see where he went dressed in such an unusual manner, and on Erev Yom Kippur! As the rabbi walked through the streets of the village, lit only by the light of the moon, the boys took great pains to make sure the rabbi couldn't see them.

They watched as he entered the forest, took the rope, put it down on the ground, and chopped down some trees with the axe. After a few trees had fallen, the rabbi used the axe to cut the trunk and branches

into smaller pieces. Then he took the rope and tied the pieces of wood into a neat bundle, which he hoisted over his shoulder. He left the forest while the boys, still unseen, followed close behind.

The rabbi walked a distance and came to a small, dilapidated cottage.

The boys were silent as the rabbi knocked on the door. They heard a faint voice come from inside the cottage. "*Who's there?*" asked the voice, which sounded like that of an elderly woman.

"It is me, Vassel the wood chopper," the rabbi replied. *"I have wood for you on this very cold morning."*

"Please go away . I have no money to give you for wood," the old woman said.

The boys looked on as the rabbi opened the door. *"Don't worry about money,"* he said to the woman. He went to the stove, placed the wood in it, and lit a fire. *"Now you'll be warm on this cold day,"* he said.

Without another word, the rabbi left the cottage. The boys looked at each other and followed the rabbi as he quickly returned home, changed into his rabbi clothes, and made his way to the synagogue for Yom Kippur services.

Once again the people questioned, *"Why is the rabbi always late for Yom Kippur? Where does he go? What does he do before services?"*

The two boys listened to the speculation: *"Maybe the rabbi goes to the hospital to visit the sick,"* one congregant suggested. *"Maybe the rabbi takes an especially long time washing and dressing for Yom Kippur,"* another guessed. And then one man said, *"Maybe the rabbi goes to heaven before coming to pray with us."*

The two boys listened, and together they responded, *"No. The rabbi does not go to heaven before services. He goes even higher." (Three Times Chai, 6-7, adapted from Y.L. Peretz as told by Rabbi David Greenberg).*

What does it mean to be a religious person? To me, that is the question behind this story. In Hebrew the word for **piety**, *chasidut*, is connected to the word for **kindness** (*chesed*). To be a religious Jew is to spend our time looking for opportunities to do random acts of *chesed*, kindness for others. As Jews and as human beings we must learn how to open our hands to one another. Notice that when a baby is born (something that is certainly on my mind these days), their tiny hands are in a fist. It is only as they grow older, that they learn how to open our hands, so that by the time a person leaves this world- it is often with hands that are wide open. This physical phenomenon reminds us that the days of our life should be spent learning how to open our hands, how to give, instead of being solely focused on taking.

Being selfish has its place, and can even be healthy at times- but all of us could use more work in learning how to be more **selfless**, in learning how to express our gratitude to God for all that we have and by paying it forward and doing kind deeds for others who are also God's creatures. Going out of our way for others, even if it makes us late for High Holiday services, is what it means to be a religious Jew.

Indeed, our tradition remind us that this theme of embracing a life of *gemilut hasadim*, of loving-kindness, runs through the entire Torah:

Rabbi Simlai taught: The Torah begins with deeds of loving-kindness and it ends with deeds of loving-kindness. It begins with deeds of loving-kindness as it is written: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21). It ends with deeds of loving-kindness, as it is written. "And God buried him in the valley in the land of Moab (Deuteronomy 34:6). (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 14a*)

According to the rabbis, bringing chesed into the world is so important that:

(It)...is one of those things that has no measure,... **and everything that lies in one's power to do that would benefit a friend, he or she is obligated to do....** Gemilut Hasadim is one of three values that the world rests upon. (*Encyclopedia Talmudit, Gemilut Hasadim, 552, 553, M. Avot 1:2, M. Peah 1:1*)

The message is simple, yet somehow difficult for us to translate into action on a daily basis. But we must. For as Maimonides reminds us: "The purpose of the laws of the Torah is to bring mercy, loving-kindness and peace upon the world." (*Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shabbat 2:3*)

We can be rich, we can be poor, we can be somewhere in-between; regardless of our financial status, we are reminded that, like the little boy in Idaho, or the humble woman in South Dakota-*everyone* has the ability to lend a helping hand to those in need.

And we should look for these opportunities on a daily basis. I was recently reading a biography on the Lubavicher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Beginning in the mid 80's, the Rebbe began a Sunday practice of handing out dollars to people. He would offer them a blessing, and invite them to use the dollars to in some way help another. Quoting his father-in-law, the Friediker Rebbe, he would say: "*When two people meet, something good should result for a third* (Telushkin, Rebbe, 506)." In other words, we have so much potential to affect so much goodness in the world, and we should continually be on the lookout for these chesed opportunities. These acts of goodness and chesed allow the world to stand -- only when our generosity overpowers the potential for us, as individuals and as a community to be destroyed by selfishness, hatred, and greed.

As the Rebbe's handing out of dollars taught, and the incident at Walmart indicated, the truly powerful thing about these random acts of chesed is that they can have an influence far beyond any one individual. There is even new

research indicating that spreading caring, compassion and kindness is, actually, biologically contagious. Recent research cited in the Harvard Business Review, suggests that:

...the more help a person receives from others, the more likely that person is to help someone else. [And] helping others makes it more likely that [individuals] themselves will receive help [when needed]...

When we feel a sense of positive reinforcement after having done a good deed, we are more likely to pay it forward by helping others. (*Gavett, Harvard Business Review, The Paying It Forward Payoff*).

So what exactly qualifies as an act of *chesed*, of loving-kindness, and how can we be more open to embracing this Jewish value in our life? Listen to the following teaching from Dr. Alan Morinis:

In the Jewish view, it isn't enough to hold warm thoughts in our heart or to wish each other well. We are meant to offer real sustenance to one another, and the ways in which we can do that are innumerable; we can offer our money, time, love, empathy, service, and open ear, manual assistance, a letter written, a call made, and on and on.

...action is the key to opening the heart. It is too easy to think good thoughts or to say the right things but then just continue to be stuck in the same old ways. We're too easy to deceive, especially self-deceive. Action is required. Then, through experience, the heart learns and opens, setting off a chain reaction of hearts opening and connecting, leading right up to openness and connection to God....

Chesed must be some sort of sustaining action, but to qualify as chesed, these actions need to come out of kindness and no other motive... **Alan Morinis, Everyday Holiness, 186**

I will leave you with one final example:

Rabbi Abraham Yachnes [once explained the] the extend of the stretch that is necessary to have an action qualify as chesed. He said that if you are walking down the street and someone is walking beside you carrying a large box, and you offer to help the person carry the box, that is not chesed. You'd simply be a terrible person not to help someone in that situation. What counts as chesed, is when you are walking the opposite way from someone carrying a burden and you turn around to help carry that load in the direction he or she is going. ***That's*** chesed. (*Alan Morinis, Everyday Holiness, 188*)

In other words, much of living a life of chesed is about the ability to ***go out of our way*** to help someone; recognizing that we often gain much more than we give by living such a life. Chesed is not simply about helping when it is convenient, when we are standing right next to the person carrying the box. It is about pushing ourselves to do better. We may not all be the type of people that turn around to carry the package, but how many of us even offer to help the person carry the box when they're going in the same direction? How many of us even hold the door open for the person who is right behind us walking into the same building as we are walking into? How many of us have a long way to go and how might we work to be more attuned to living a life of *chesed* on a daily basis?

I would venture to say that all of us in this room are fairly blessed. Sure, we all face challenges in our life, some of us bigger challenges than others. And yes, life is so often not fair, and things do not always go the way that we want them to go. But even with all of this acknowledged, the reality is we are all SO SO very blessed. We have so much to be grateful for in life. We have so much blessing in our lives. Shouldn't we spend just a small portion of each day working to increase the goodness and the blessing in the lives of others? Shouldn't we choose to live lives that are magnanimous and filled with generosity? Couldn't we find A few tiny moments every day to go out of our way to help someone else who needs a bit of assistance, a friendly smile, or a kind word?

The choice is ours. Are we going to focus on what we receive or don't receive every day; **or are we going to focus on what we can give?** Because as Sir Winston Churchill once said: *"We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give."*

What kind of person do you want to be? What kind of chesed can you bring into the world? What can you do, today, and tomorrow, and the day after that, to make someone else's life (perhaps even a complete stranger), that much better? Because *to do that* -- **to live in that way** -- is to come to know ourselves, our fellow human beings, and our God in a way that brings a meaning and purpose into our lives and into our world.

The Psalmist taught:

*Adonai, you anoint my head with oil, my cup is overflowing. Surely good and loving-kindness will pursue me all of the days of my life. And I shall come to dwell in the house of Adonai forever (**Psalm 23**).*

As we reflect back on this past year and look forward to a new one, I imagine that many of us feel that we are blessed with cups that are overflowing. It is my hope and prayer that those very blessings which we take for granted each and every day, those parts of our cups that are more than half full, inspire us to stretch -- our hearts, our souls, and our hands -- towards our fellow human being- so that we might bring that much more love, and that much more *chesed* into the world.

Shanah Tova U'metukah- May this be a good and sweet new year; and may the work of our hands, and the kindness of our hearts help us to make it so.